Flip for COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

Football Preview

SEPTEMBER 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 8
SI.COM | @SINOW
Photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

Sports Illustrated

2022
NFL

JOE

by
CONOR
ORR

Their Ultracool QB
Has Transformed the
Bengals' Vibe.
JOE BURROW
Knows the
Job Isn't Done

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Guest
how you
guest
28
81

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LINEUP

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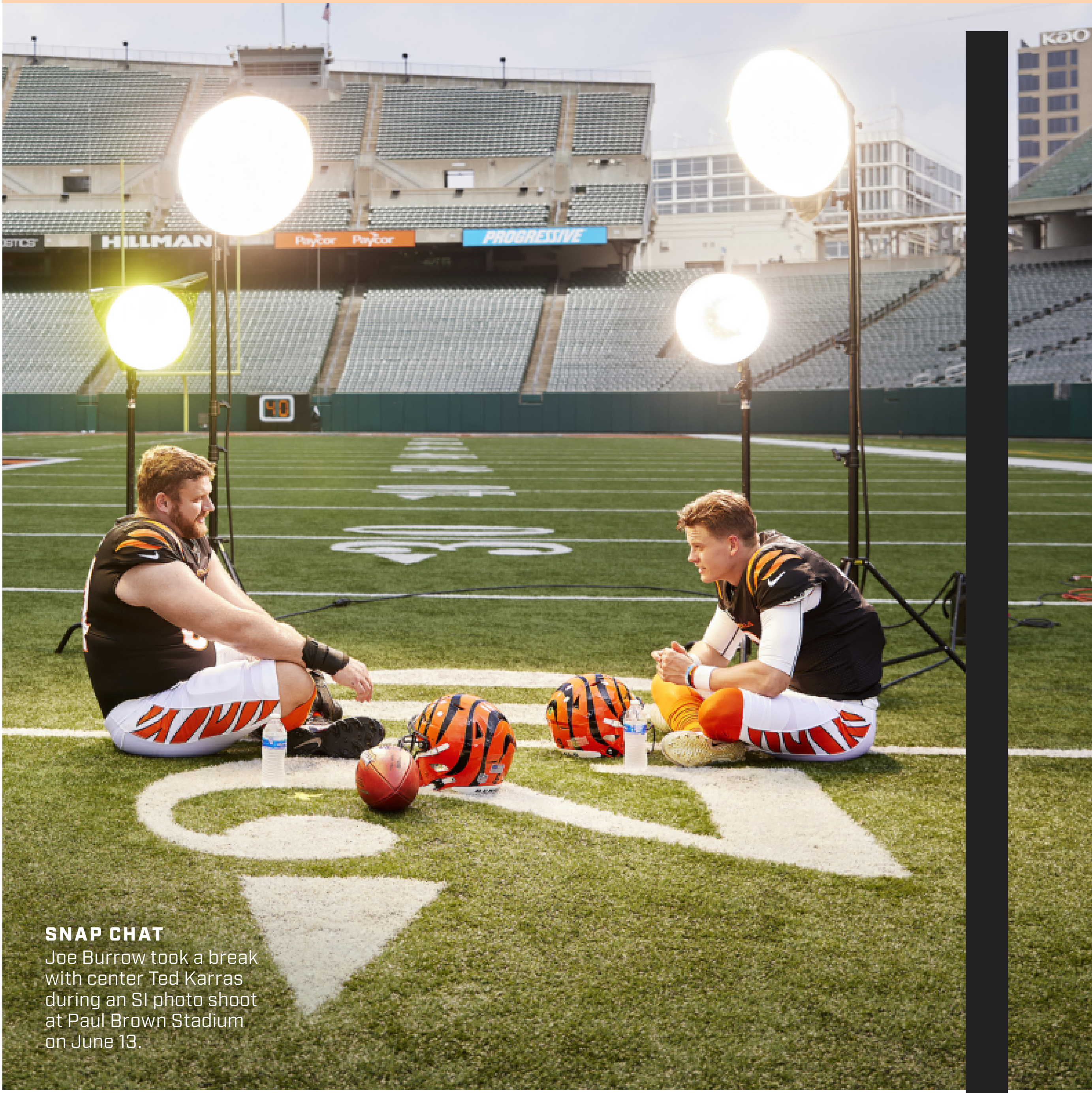
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SNAP CHAT
Joe Burrow took a break with center Ted Karras during an SI photo shoot at Paul Brown Stadium on June 13.

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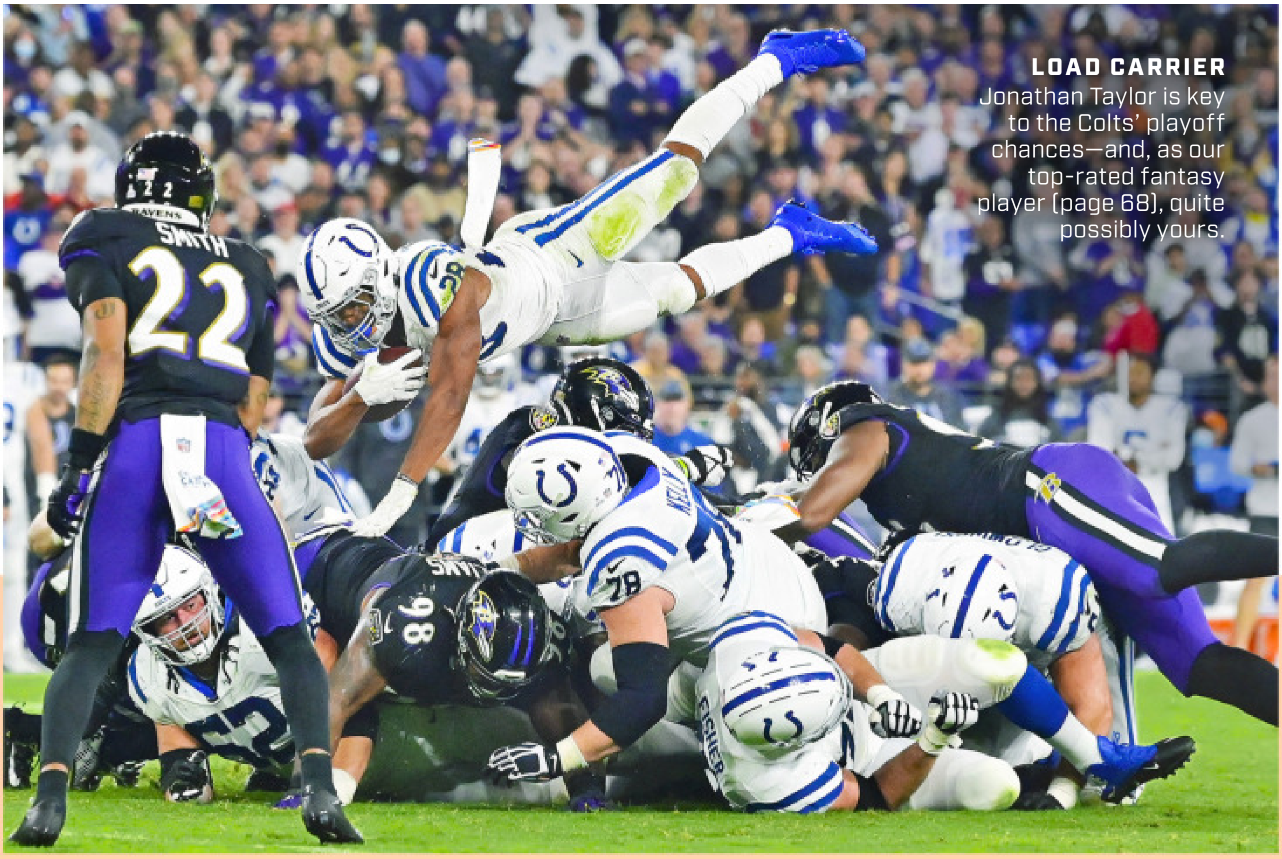

LOAD CARRIER Jonathan Taylor is key to the Colts' playoff chances—and, as our top-rated fantasy player (page 68), quite possibly yours.

TOMMY GILLIGAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

20 NFL 22

PREVIEW

4 **WELCOME TO '22** Super Bowl contenders, games to watch, awards picks . . . and everything else you need to know

24 **JOE BURROW** After a surprise Super Bowl run, there's one question: Can Joe Brrr and the Bengals do it again? **BY CONOR ORR**

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50 **TUA TAGOVAILOA** Somehow, the Dolphins' franchise QB has become the NFL's most polarizing player **BY ALEX PREWITT**

58 **SCOUTING REPORTS** Breaking down the chances of every team in the league, division by division **BY GARY GRAMLING AND CONOR ORR**

CFB

FLIP FOR THE

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW

›

GAME ON!

Will Stetson Bennett and Georgia repeat? Can Will Anderson Jr. win Bama's third straight Heisman? Which transfer QBs will thrive? And where exactly is realignment headed? All (and more) is answered in our special college football preview section. Turn to the back cover . . .

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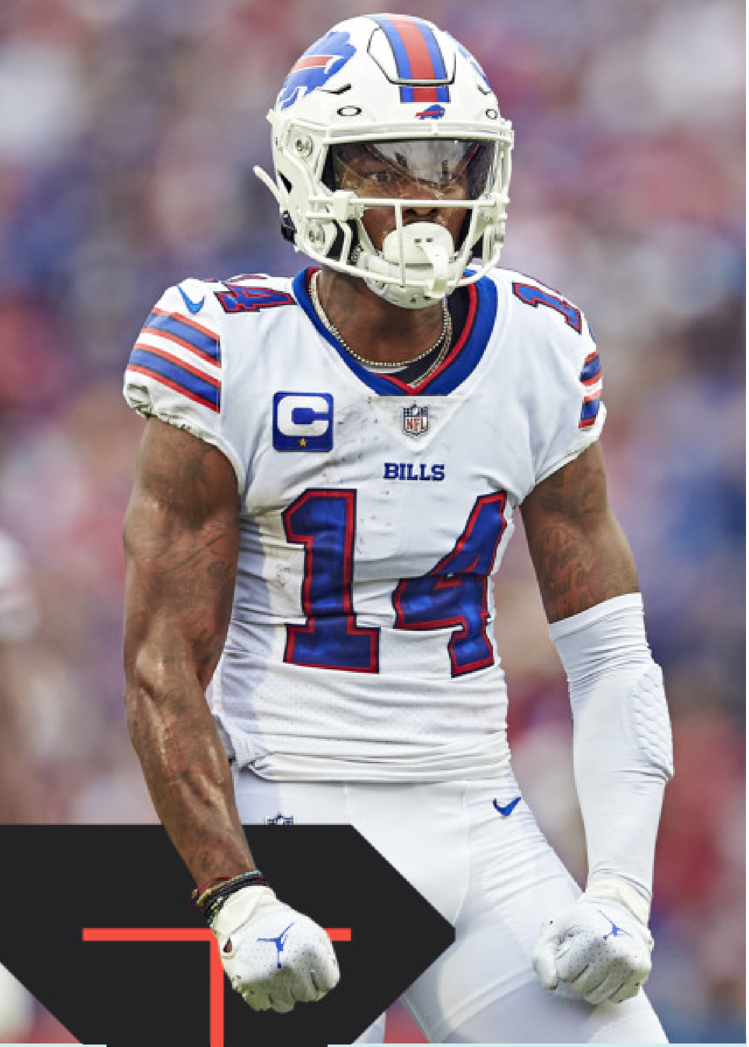
KOHJIRO KINNO

WELCOME TO 2022 NFL PREVIEW

Can the Rams repeat? Will the Bengals hold off **LAMAR JACKSON** and the Ravens in the AFC North? We break down the season, starting with the 12 teams that have a realistic shot at winning **SUPER BOWL LVII**



THE BENGALS' making the Super Bowl after going 4-11-1 in 2020 could be written off as a once-in-a-decade type run, but it could also be telling us that teams can rise and fall quickly in the modern NFL. I didn't have Cincinnati on my list of possible champs last year—or Tampa Bay in '20, for that matter. So in an effort to look less silly, in addition to these dozen teams that could actually win Super Bowl LVII, I'm allowing myself a 13th entry: the Eagles. —*Conor Orr*

1. BILLS (+650 TO WIN SUPER BOWL)
▸ I feel like I've said this 1,000 times this offseason, but I'll say it again: I see no holes in this roster. The biggest challenge for the Bills will be to replicate the play-calling rhythm of departed offensive coordinator Brian Daboll, but Stefon Diggs *(left)* & Co. are the safest Super Bowl bet.

2. BENGALS (+2000)
▸ We rarely see a Super Bowl runner-up climb back into the game (nearly one-third of them don't even reach the postseason the following year), but Joe Burrow *(page 24)* is simply better than most quarterbacks. The Bengals' offense is deep and well constructed. This is a special team.

3. RAVENS (+2200)
▸ Baltimore already had one of the best drafts in history in 2018, and '22 may end up being a close second. But the better reasons to love the Ravens this year: No one has figured out how to stop their offense, and they'll be healthier, more athletic and younger at key O-line positions.

4. COLTS (+2500)
▸ If Matt Ryan is the answer at QB, the Colts could find their way back to the Super Bowl. They already possess so many ingredients for a successful team: an unstoppable running game, a good-enough offensive line, a physical defensive interior and QB-hunting edge rushers.

5. COWBOYS (+1600)
▸ Dallas has one of the five best quarterbacks in football; elite coordinators; a game-changing, positionless pass rusher; and a running game that should be solid enough to complement the times Dak Prescott isn't hurling the ball to CeeDee Lamb.

6. CHIEFS (+900)
▸ K.C. has the best combo of QB talent and offensive coaching acumen. The acquisition of JuJu Smith-Schuster, among the best receivers in the league before his quarterback aged into a petrified fossil before our eyes, was among the smartest low-cost moves of the offseason.

ROB TRINGALI

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CeeDee BOMB
Lamb (88) gives Prescott and the Cowboys a scary big-play threat.

7. CHARGERS (+1400)

▸ Brandon Staley was determined to mold a team in his vision, but in his rookie season the coach didn't have the ramp-up time or personnel flexibility to get it done. Now the Bolts have beefed up, making themselves harder to throw against and adding some juice to their pass rush.

8. BRONCOS (+1600)

▸ Only five coaches have made it to the Super Bowl in their first seasons, but by virtue of having one of the six best QBs (new pickup Russell Wilson), Nathaniel Hackett gets his team on this list. The D is keeping largely the same principles installed by former coach Vic Fangio.

9. RAIDERS (+3300)

▸ They are considered long shots, but the Raiders possess the critical, foundational pieces necessary for a playoff run: an accurate quarterback at the peak of his abilities (Derek Carr), a dominant pass rusher (Maxx Crosby) and a set of dependable playmakers.

10. PACKERS (+1000)

▸ Green Bay is going to be on any list of legitimate title contenders, even though Matt LaFleur's postseason runs have been marked by some notable blunders. The Packers fortified their defense by drafting two key players out of Georgia: Quay Walker and Devonte Wyatt.

11. BUCCANEERS (+750)

▸ They've gotten younger to double down on what they do best: Run the ball up the gut to set up their offensive playmakers, and stuff running lanes to set up their defensive playmakers. A hunch: This is the end for Tom Brady in Tampa Bay, but it's not the end for him in the NFL.

12. RAMS (+1000)

▸ The champs need to ease the burden on wideout Cooper Kupp and provide QB Matthew Stafford with more options. Is Allen Robinson II, signed from the Bears, the solution? After years in offensive purgatory, one hopes he'll have time to shine in L.A. □

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10 GAMES TO WATCH

The schedule is bursting with contests featuring bad blood, beefs and epic individual showdowns. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's Conor Orr picks his top matchups

1. BRONCOS AT SEAHAWKS Sept. 12
▸ The first Monday-night game of the season will have revenge as its theme. Russell Wilson *(near right)*, after 10 years as the Seahawks' quarterback, returns to Seattle and the scene of his messy divorce from coach Pete Carroll *(far right)*.

2. PACKERS AT BUCCANEERS Sept. 25
▸ I am not a fan of describing games as QB vs. QB. But we're really and truly running out of chances to see Tom Brady play against other elite quarterbacks—and four-time MVP Aaron Rodgers certainly fits that bill.

3. CHIEFS AT BUCCANEERS Oct. 2
▸ The last time we saw these teams on the same field, Patrick Mahomes was frantically trying to evade the Buccaneers' pass rush in Super Bowl LV. The Chiefs' rebuilt offensive line is a direct response to how bad it looked in Kansas City's 31–9 loss.

4. COMMANDERS AT EAGLES Nov. 14
▸ I would not be looking forward to this game if I were new Washington QB Carson Wentz. Not only will fans ride the former Eagle mercilessly, but Philly should be much better on defense in 2022.

5. COWBOYS AT PACKERS Nov. 13
▸ You know Rodgers would love to drop 40 points on his former boss, Dallas coach Mike McCarthy, and then pile on with some passive-aggressive references to their past in the postgame presser.

6. RAMS AT CHARGERS Jan. 1
▸ It will be stunning if both of these teams aren't in contention late in the season. They last faced each other in 2018, which predates the opening of the stadium they now share. This one could be a meaningful and offensively explosive turf war.

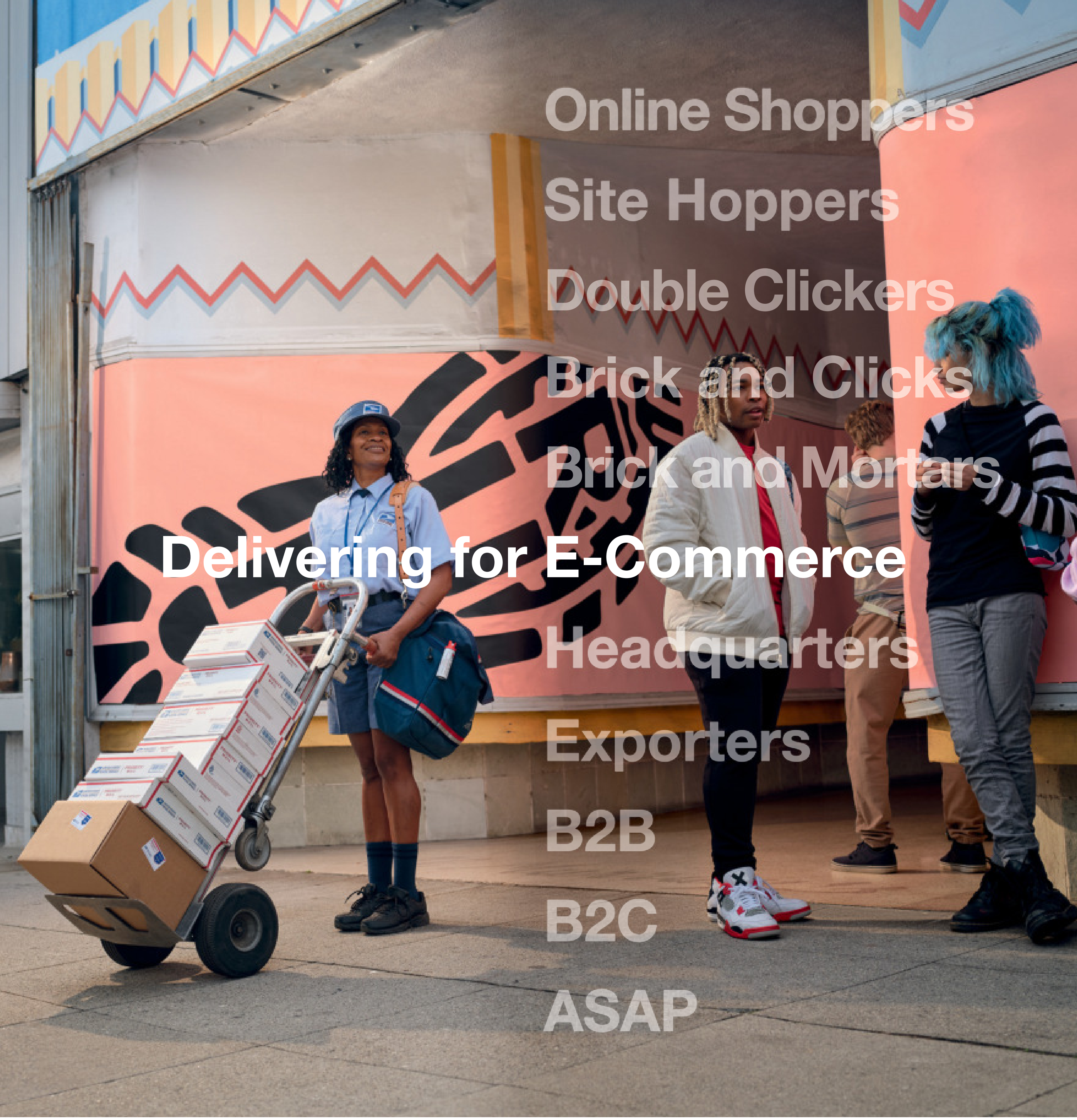
7. BROWNS AT PANTHERS Sept. 11
▸ Want to see announcers twist themselves into pretzels reaching for euphemisms? The Deshaun Watson story will be front and center when Baker Mayfield takes on the team that traded him after giving Watson the biggest guaranteed contract in history.

8. SAINTS AT CARDINALS Oct. 20
▸ Arizona is in prime time Thursday night the week that wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins *(left)* returns from a suspension for performance-enhancing drugs, against a Saints team that could make this a legitimate shootout.

9. BILLS AT LIONS Nov. 24
▸ Dan Campbell's crew is improving, so this is going to be a relevant, feisty Thanksgiving game featuring Detroit—which is something we haven't seen for a half decade.

10. BENGALS AT PATRIOTS Dec. 24
▸ I'm placing this one here strictly for the football nerds in the room. I always like to watch quarterbacks face Bill Belichick for the first time. Joe Burrow probably won't consider it an early Christmas gift. □

RON CHENDY/USA TODAY SPORTS (WILSON); BRACE HEMMELGARN/USA TODAY SPORTS (CARROLL); STEVE ROBERTS/USA TODAY SPORTS (HOPKINS)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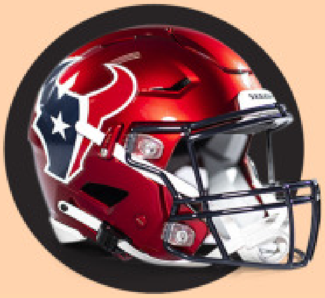
NO MORE FLIP FLOPS

After an unsatisfying ending (well, outside of Kansas City) in last season's game of the year, the NFL changed its playoff rules to reduce the importance of the overtime coin toss

PERHAPS THE MOST improbable under-the-radar stat put up by Josh Allen last year was his record calling coin tosses. The Bills quarterback was a perfect 9–0 in the regular season. But in the playoffs against the Chiefs, he went cold. First he was wrong on the opening toss. In overtime, he was unlucky again, and that cost his team dearly. Kansas City took the kickoff and drove for a touchdown, depriving Allen, who threw for 329 yards and four scores that day, of the chance to even touch the ball in OT.

In the spring, the NFL changed the rules for playoff overtime; now each team is guaranteed at least one possession before sudden death kicks in. (The old format will still apply in the regular season: A TD on the first possession ends the game, but anything less and the other team gets a crack.) It's cold comfort for Allen, but at least he knows going forward the conclusion to his season will be more about passes thrown than coins tossed. *—Mark Bechtel*

OVER EARLY Travis Kelce's TD catch denied Buffalo a chance with the ball in overtime.



CHANGE AT THE TOP

The NFL is allowing alternate helmet designs that will add flash—and bring back a familiar face. We missed you, Pat Patriot!

▸ **TEN YEARS** ago, amid concussion concerns, the NFL forbade teams from using more than one helmet, thinking that the fewer helmets the players needed to be fitted for, the better. This year the NFL will again allow teams a second helmet design for use with their throwback or color rush schemes. The Texans unveiled a bright alternate *(above)*. The Patriots will welcome back their tricorne-wearing mascot of yore. And the Panthers will try an all-black look. "Whenever a team wears . . . black accessories," edge Brian Burns told the team website, "it just brings out that dog in them." —M.B.

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WINTERFROST

CRIMSON PRIDE Anderson could be the 24th Bama first-round pick since 2017.

THE PICKS ARE IN (ISH)

Sure, the 2023 draft is eight months away, but here's an early crack at our list of the 10 best NFL prospects

1 **WILL ANDERSON JR.** Edge, Alabama
NFL teams crave edge rushers, and Anderson (an NCAA-high 17½ sacks in 2021) is college's best.

2 **C.J. STROUD** QB, Ohio State
As a redshirt freshman last year, Stroud set 17 Buckeyes records at a school that's had some good QBs.

3 **JALEN CARTER** DT, Georgia
More than a few people like Carter more than former linemate Travon Walker, last year's top pick.

4 **BRYCE YOUNG** QB, Alabama
The defending Heisman winner may be only six feet tall, but he has a big arm and shiftiness to burn.

5 **BRYAN BRESEE** DT, Clemson
The nation's top recruit in 2020 will play hungry this year in his return from an ACL injury.

6 **MICHAEL MAYER** TE, Notre Dame
The junior already owns Irish tight end records for receptions and yards in a season—and he can block.

7 **WILL LEVIS** QB, Kentucky
With size and speed Levis has tons of upside, but will need to cut down the mistakes (13 picks last year).

8 **KAYSHON BOUTTE** WR, LSU
He led the Tigers in TD catches and yards in '21 despite missing seven games with an ankle injury.

9 **JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA** WR, Ohio State
With 95 catches for 1,606 yards as a sophomore, he outplayed a pair of first-round receiver teammates.

10 **KELEE RINGO** CB, Georgia
The fast, long 6' 2", 205-pounder hits like a safety but covers like an elite corner. —M.B.

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Who's the MVP? Unfold to see SI's picks for top NFL awards

STEP UP TO THE MIKE

As the NFL adds yet another broadcast partner (Amazon Prime), these personalities are the ones we'd most like to see in the booth someday

JASON KELCE Eagles center

▸ His Mummers-inspired (and perhaps Bud Light–fueled) Super Bowl parade speech in 2018 may have placed him on our collective radar as a beyond-football personality, but the truth is that Kelce *(left)* has always been a thoughtful, deeply insightful individual who just so happens to play football.

ANDREW WHITWORTH Former offensive tackle

▸ The longtime Ram and Bengal knows how to walk the line between polish and humility, and he is a big presence with a bear hug of a Southern accent that would grow on viewers over time.

NDAMUKONG SUH Free-agent defensive tackle

▸ Suh regularly delivers fascinating insights on the intricacies of line play. He once described how watching *Animal Planet* made him a better player.

MALCOLM JENKINS Former safety

▸ Jenkins appeared on CNN as a political commentator after becoming the face of efforts to change the NFL's stance on issues of social justice and equality from the inside.

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL ALLIANCE PLAYERS

▸ It's time the networks open up their booths to more women who are fully capable of providing strong insight and analysis. —C.O.

SWITCHING CHANNELS

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This season is one of rare upheaval in the broadcast booth, highlighted by the longtime top team at Fox moving to ESPN and a new power duo on a new platform

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● Kevin Burkhardt ›	● Joe Buck ›	● Steve Levy ›
● Greg Olsen ›	● Troy Aikman ›	● Louis Riddick ›

NBC SUNDAY	AMAZON THURSDAY
● Al Michaels	›
● Mike Tirico ›	
● Cris Collinsworth	
● Kirk Herbstreit	›

TIM NWACHUKWU/GETTY IMAGES (KELCE); JEROME MIRON/USA TODAY SPORTS (MICHAELS); MAX GERSH/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL/USA TODAY NETWORK (HERBSTREIT)

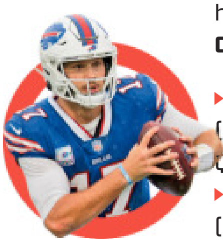
NFL
PREVIEW

AWARDS

Our NFL gurus project who will head home with hardware after the season

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

JOSH ALLEN
QUARTERBACK
BILLS



The 26-year-old QB threw for 4,407 yards and ran for another 763 last year. He's only getting better, and so are the Bills, which will make his eye-popping stats hard to ignore.
ODDS: +700

- **NEXT:** QB Justin Herbert, LAC (+1000); QB Tom Brady, TB (+800); QB Joe Burrow, CIN (+1200)
- **LONG SHOT:** RB Derrick Henry, TEN (+5000)

OFFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

JUSTIN JEFFERSON
WIDE RECEIVER
VIKINGS

No one has amassed more receiving yards in his first two NFL seasons than Jefferson (3,016). Pity defenses if he makes a third-year leap.
ODDS: +2500

- **NEXT:** RB Jonathan Taylor, IND (+800); WR Ja'Marr Chase, CIN (+3300); WR Cooper Kupp, LAR (+800)
- **LONG SHOT:** TE George Kittle, SF (+4000)

OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

CHRIS OLAVE
WIDE RECEIVER
SAINTS

New Orleans is hurting for big-play receivers, so Olave—a speedy, solid route-runner who had 13 TDs last year at Ohio State—will have a chance to make an impact.
ODDS: +1000

- **NEXT:** WR Treylon Burks, TEN (+700); RB Breece Hall, NYJ (+800); WR Drake London, ATL (+700)
- **LONG SHOT:** WR Alec Pierce, IND (+3500)

ROB TRINGALI (ALLEN); MITCH STRINGER/USA TODAY SPORTS (JEFFERSON); STEPHEN LEW/USA TODAY SPORTS (OLAVE)

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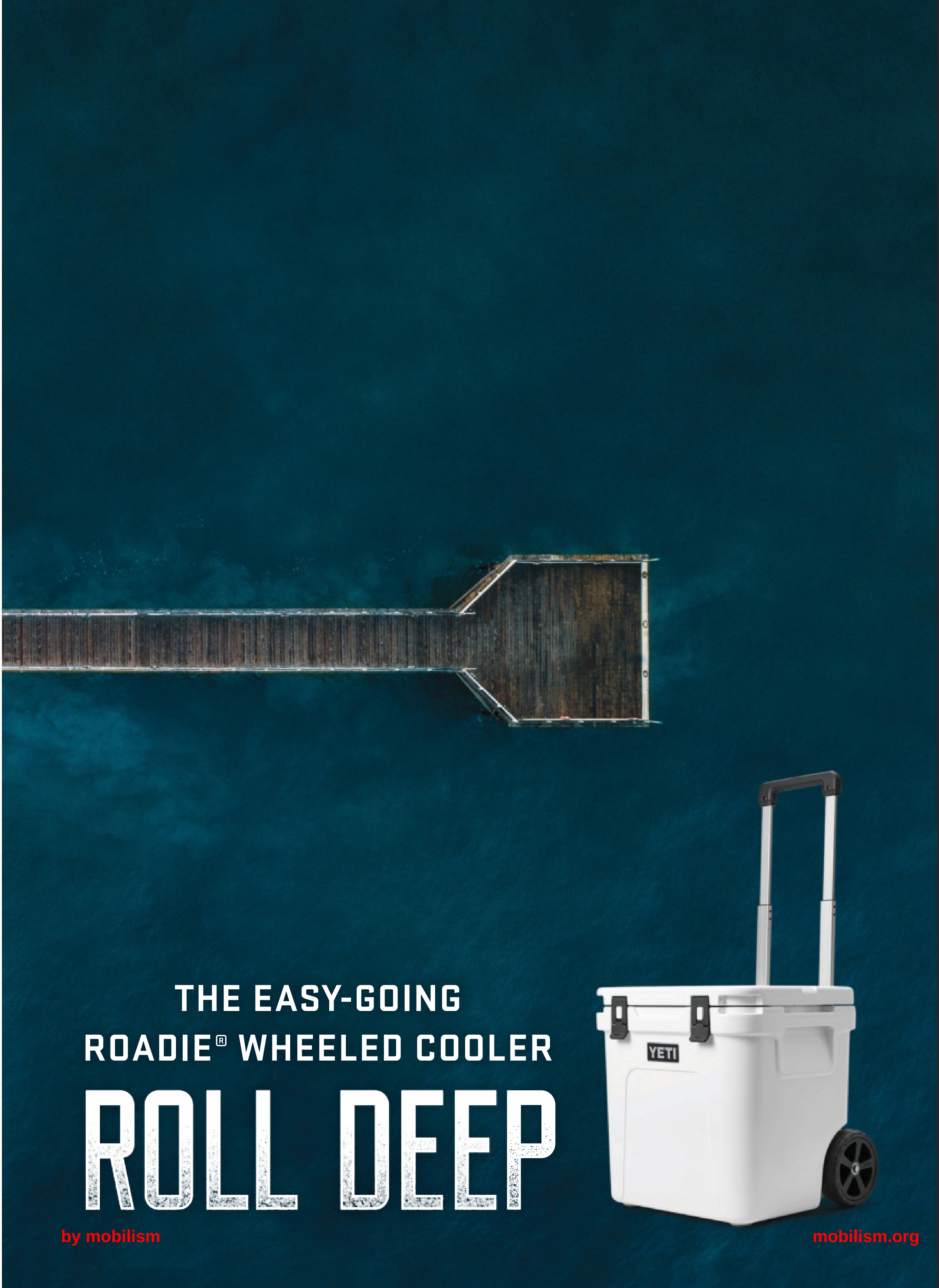
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DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

AARON DONALD • DT, RAMS
To the relief of Rams fans and the chagrin of QBs, the 31-year-old, who flirted with retirement after winning Super Bowl LVI, returns. A fourth DPOY award would give him the most ever—one more than Lawrence Taylor and J.J. Watt.
ODDS: +650

▸ **NEXT:** DE Myles Garrett, CLE (+600); LB T.J. Watt, PIT (+650); LB Micah Parsons, DAL (+850)
▸ **LONG SHOT:** LB Von Miller, BUF (+2800)

DEFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

KAYVON THIBODEAUX
EDGE
GIANTS

The disruptive ex-Duck will have a chance to rack up sacks against a last-place schedule dotted with QBs of limited elusiveness.
ODDS: +550

▸ **NEXT:** CB Derek Stingley Jr., HOU (+900); DE Aidan Hutchinson, DET (+450); CB Sauce Gardner, NYJ (+900)
▸ **LONG SHOT:** LB Nakobe Dean, PHI (+1300)

COACH OF THE YEAR

BRANDON STALEY
CHARGERS

With an improved roster and a year under his belt, Staley, 39, has the Bolts—who stumbled down the stretch—primed to make a run in the AFC.
ODDS: +1200

▸ **NEXT:** Brian Daboll, NYG (+1400); Nathaniel Hackett, DEN (+1400); Dan Campbell, DET (+1800)
LONG SHOT: Todd Bowles, TB (+2500)

COMEBACK PLAYER OF THE YEAR

SAQUON BARKLEY
RUNNING BACK
GIANTS

If he stays healthy (and that's a big if), Barkley could thrive under new coach Brian Daboll, who will use him as a runner and a receiver.
ODDS: +1800

▸ **NEXT:** QB Baker Mayfield, CAR (+1400); QB Daniel Jones, NYG (+750); RB Christian McCaffrey, CAR (+1000)
▸ **LONG SHOT:** DE Carl Lawson, NYJ (+3300)

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (DONALD); RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (THIBODEAUX); KIRK IRWIN/GETTY IMAGES (STALEY); KEN MURRAY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BARKLEY)

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20 NFL 22
PREVIEW

THE NEW NOR

Last winter **JOE BURROW** led the Bengals on a stunning Super Bowl run. With it came the expectation that he'll do it all over again this year, a challenge the NFL's newest superstar is uniquely equipped to take on

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SWATHS OF MOSS topped with large ferns spread against a wall of brush, boulders and some kind of metallic panel full of tiger stripes. The director of this landscape is militaristic in his timing, calling out a two-number cadence before a hiss signals the unleashing of flames shooting out of metal canisters behind the leaves.

ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHHHHH.
ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHH.
ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHHHHH.

The sights and sounds taken together, it creates the illusion that this rainforest is about to explode.

It is Joe Burrow's third photo shoot of a sun-soaked June day in southwestern Ohio; this one is for the team, the resulting shots to be splashed across the Paul Brown Stadium jumbotron this fall. Over the course of those sessions, he has been asked to pantomime throwing a football, to stand with his hands holding his collar, to crouch in pre-snap formation and to spin the football on his fingers, which—like everything else—seems to come effortlessly to the man who last season led the Bengals to one of the most stunning Super Bowl appearances in modern NFL history. Still, when the ball flutters off his hands and onto the turf, two members of the Bengals' equipment staff parked nearby laugh in a loud, Nelson Muntz sort of way to get a rise out of him. At one point, Burrow longingly discusses with a teammate the prospect of dunking into a cold tub.

"You feel like a zoo animal sometimes when people are just looking at you and taking pictures; it's all very weird," he says a few minutes later while unpacking a Tupperware container of Szechuan-dressed chicken, brown rice and broccoli prepared by the team nutrition staff hustling behind a stretch of buffet trays stocked with roasted vegetables. Like most of what Burrow says, the observation seems neither good nor bad to him. He's not complaining about life as a megastar; he just doesn't like going places where he has to turn down autograph requests. He doesn't like other people being nervous around him. He rarely does interviews or podcasts outside of his league-mandated responsibilities. Four years ago, during his first season at LSU, he could walk from Tiger Stadium across the street to his car without security. A year later, amid a national title run, he gave serious thought to hiring a full-time bodyguard. (And, yes, as he discusses his discomfort with being relentlessly gawked at, a reporter breathlessly records his lunch order.)

He is at peace with this existence, one encapsulated perfectly by this shoot. Before his arrival, this is the dark, cavernous ground floor of a parking garage. Burrow arrives skeptically eyeing this artificial world of heat and light and sound, of blaring music and constructed grandeur that required the work of a local fireworks specialist. Then, with cool indifference, he ambles inside that world and blends in seamlessly. Absent any effort, Ordinary Joe becomes that grandiosity. What better symbol for a player who had so innocently and unexpectedly stumbled into megastardom, first in Baton Rouge and then in Cincinnati? Incredible yet incredulous. As a city awaits an encore performance to last winter's magical run, is this the genealogical makeup required to deliver once more?

* * *

JUST A FEW days before Super Bowl LVI, Burrow sent a text to his closest confidantes, confirming their weekly ritual was still on. His firm grasp on sanity amid sudden, uncomfortable fame depends in part on Xbox Live nights. That's when the boys

JEFFERY A. SALTER

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WINNING STREAK
Taylor (right) and Burrow led Cincy to its first playoff victory in 31 years.

from Athens High all hop on. These days it's *Star Wars Battlefront II*, but last winter it was *Grand Theft Auto V*'s fist-fight death matches, where they would embody their digital avatars and beat the hell out of one another while trash-talking over their headsets.

"That's what I look forward to during the season," Burrow says. "Get in on Monday, watch the film, then get away from football a little bit. Hang out with those guys." As Burrow explains this, it dawns on him that the Bengals' status as reigning AFC champions has earned Cincinnati two *Monday Night Football* appearances this year among their five total prime-time games—that's after they had just one (a September *Thursday Night Football* victory over the Jaguars) last season. It will wreak havoc on the Xbox schedule, but special accommodations will be made to fit in game night.

In this space, everything is like it was before LSU, before the national title game and the cigar, before they couldn't go to the bars without a Burrow-hunting Snapchat mob flooding the place. Here, those surrounding him won't hesitate to poke fun at the NFL superstar. They'll adopt a doofy voice and say, *Ohhhh, look at me, big Mr. Quarterback!*

This is all part of the contemporary monastic life he's assumed. After a two-hour workout, he "plays video games, then, when my eyes start to hurt, I switch to TV." He goes to bed most nights at 9 p.m. and rarely sets an alarm. He vacationed this offseason in Scottsdale, Ariz., where teammate Sam Hubbard has a house, followed by a trip to his childhood home in Athens, Ohio.

He says he spends a lot of time inside his own head. Asked whether he'd be more comfortable in, say, the 1960s, a decade during which the world's best quarterbacks could toil in relative anonymity, he jokes that the idea that he is a man out of his time holds some truth. Though, he concedes, "The pay these days makes up for it."

"The only time I ever really feel normal is when

IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

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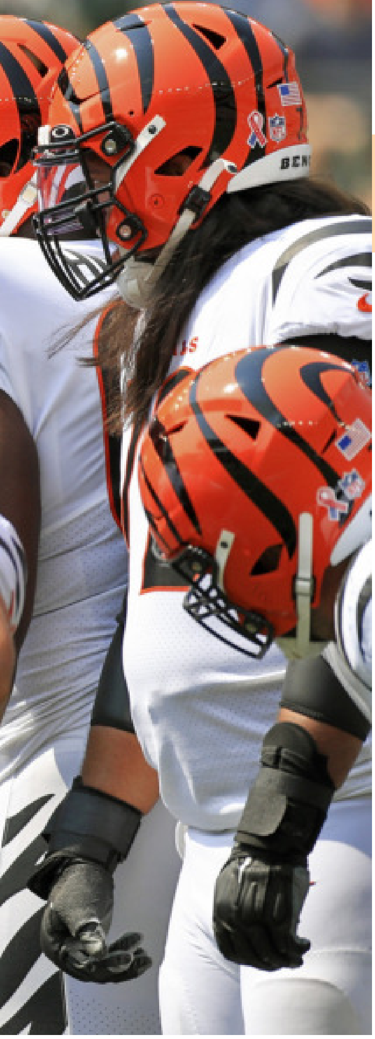

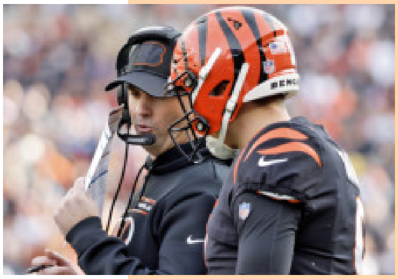

"I meet [new] people, and they're **FREAKING OUT**," says Burrow. "I'm just me. Everyone I grew up with is super weirded out by it, too."

I'm in there with the guys in the locker room, [or] I'm talking to my friends from high school or my college friends," Burrow says. "I meet [new] people, and they're freaking out or something. [But] I'm just me. And everyone I grew up with is super weirded out by it, too."

* * *

DURING BURROW'S ROOKIE season he made it a point to sit at a different lunch table every day. He said he was serious about the idea of camaraderie and where it comes from. But after a while, he stopped thinking about it. If there was an empty seat, he just sat there, not looking up to see who else was around.

Heading into the 2021 season after a four-win campaign, the team was coiled tighter than ever. So were their games. The Bengals went to overtime twice in the first five weeks, with two other contests decided by three points each. They were an unexpected success story at 4–2 when they traveled to Baltimore on Oct. 24 to face a Ravens team that had beaten them five consecutive times and outscored them 65–6 in their two meetings in '20. The Bengals throttled their division rivals that day; Burrow threw three touchdown passes among the offense's 41 points, and the defense sacked Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson five times. And yet, the following week, on Halloween, they lost to the Jets, one of the worst teams in football, who were starting backup quarterback Mike White. The week after that, they gave up 41 points to the Browns, dropping their record to 5–4.

And so the season went, vacillating between brilliant and cringeworthy, but with an underlying promise evident every week, Burrow says, in the kinds of small moments the outside world couldn't see. Meals. Meetings. Winks and nods around the building. When coach Zac Taylor would go home at night, he'd tell his wife, Sarah, about all the little inside jokes developing in the locker room.

Maybe it was the way veteran tight end CJ Uzomah went into the facility every day with the intention of messing with receiver Ja'Marr Chase. During otherwise banal practices, Uzomah would just stare at the soon-to-be Rookie of the Year. Chase hated getting stared at. They would crack up afterward ("CJ has been aggravating me since I got here," Chase says, with love).

Maybe it was the way offensive coordinator Brian Callahan would splice in random embarrassing footage of players and coaches into their weekly meeting videos. While breaking up the tired act of film-watching has become a somewhat standard ploy by coaches, Callahan would take things to another level. He did an especially deep dive on Trenton Irwin, uncovering the fact that the receiver had been in a commercial for canned soup as a child and including the ad in a session.

"What's great about our team is you start to have these little moments with everybody," Burrow says. "It's not just me and the receivers or the offensive linemen. I think it's pretty rare and I honestly think that's why we ended up winning all those games."

After a Dec. 12 overtime loss to the 49ers dropped the Bengals to 7–6, they won three of their final four games to clinch the AFC North, including a 34–31 win over Kansas City in Week 17. Against the Chiefs, Burrow threw for 446 yards and four touchdowns—a week after throwing for 525 yards and four TDs in completing a season sweep of the

KIRK IRWIN/GETTY IMAGES

Ravens. It was the preamble to one of the great unforeseen runs in any sport's postseason history. A narrow 26–19 wild-card win over the Raiders that came down to a last-second goal line stand by the defense. An even narrower 19–16 win over the Titans in the divisional round that was tied with 20 seconds remaining in the game before cornerback Eli Apple tipped a Ryan Tannehill pass in the air, allowing teammate Logan Wilson to intercept it. With one pass, Burrow advanced the Bengals into range for a game-winning Evan McPherson field goal. They recovered from an 11-point halftime deficit in the AFC title game but allowed the Chiefs to tie the score at 24 as time expired in regulation. On the first drive of overtime, safety Vonn Bell intercepted a Patrick Mahomes pass, setting the Bengals up for another game-winning field goal drive.

KINGS OF QUEEN CITY
Burrow (right) has joined Reds star Joey Votto as Cincinnati royalty.

For his part, Burrow established himself as one of the NFL's elite quarterbacks. Going back to his breakout senior season at LSU, his mastery of the modern game looked as though it came from nowhere, but it had always existed, waiting for someone to yank it out of him. In 2018, his first year starting at LSU, he completed just 57.8% of his passes for 2,688 yards, 16 touchdowns and five interceptions. In '19, under a new coordinator, Sean Payton disciple Joe Brady, Burrow threw for 5,671 yards, 60 touchdowns and six interceptions.

The aggressive spread scheme allowed Burrow to maximize his greatest strengths. With near-flawless throwing mechanics and a textbook foundational platform on seemingly every throw, his ball placement is impeccable. He has a fast release (last season it was just 0.19 seconds slower than that of the famously decisive Tom Brady). He is athletic, but in a hyperfunctional way for the position, which allows him to keep plays alive just as efficiently as a more mobile quarterback while maintaining a perfect stance from which to drive accurate passes.

"His pocket movement is Brady-ish," says JT O'Sullivan, a retired NFL veteran who now analyzes the position for his channel, The QB School. "I think Brady would love to be as good an athlete as Burrow is, and that's not knocking Brady. What strikes me about Joe is, not only does he have all these great attributes, but he seems to be so comfortably him. And that goes a long way."

Give Burrow a system with some playmakers and a sliver of open space, and even a defense dropping seven or eight defenders into coverage on every down is susceptible to what Uzomah calls "that swag."

Burrow's rookie year ended with a gruesome knee injury (a torn ACL and MCL) in November, with the Bengals 2-7-1. Protection remained an issue in 2021, when he was sacked 70 times during the regular season and the postseason—no quarterback has ever absorbed more than 76 sacks in a season. But the addition of Chase pushed the offense to a new level. Burrow could rifle a ball to his old LSU teammate well before the receiver came out of his break, and

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Burrow's ball placement on shorter throws allowed Chase to turn them into long gains. It made the Bengals' offense nearly impossible to scheme against, leaving the pass rush as an opponent's lone hope.

In the locker room, Burrow wasn't much of a speech giver. He says he does not actively seek advice; his father, Jimmy, a long-time Division I football coach, sends Burrow pointers in a text message before every game but never receives a response. Perhaps one of Burrow's most memorable message to the team throughout the entire season was to dismiss the rallying cry that Bengals fans had adopted during the run: "Why not us?" Burrow thought it was too suggestive of an underdog, a team that was less than. He didn't see the Bengals that way.

* * *

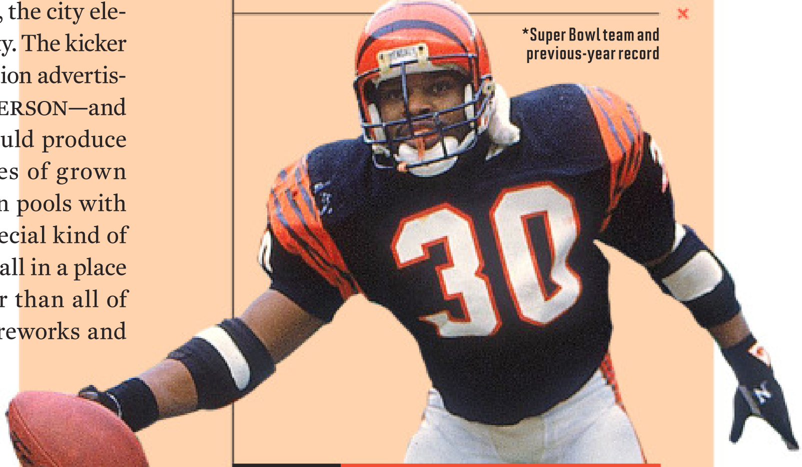
AS THE POSTSEASON run unfolded, the city elevated the Bengals to new levels of celebrity. The kicker was on billboards for a local weather station advertising itself AS ACCURATE AS EVAN MCPHERSON—and hailing them as saviors. Every win would produce social media and local news montages of grown men weeping, jumping into near-frozen pools with lit cigars in their mouths. There is a special kind of pressure that comes with reviving football in a place as starved as Cincinnati. It was bigger than all of them. Out of their control. A wall of fireworks and flames, noise and light.

His teammates looked to their quarterback and likely saw him retreat within himself. Within his team. Within his small network. And so, the team did the same, burying themselves in one another, in the little things that bound them and made them enjoy coming to work.

Because of the pandemic, Taylor's kids didn't get a chance to meet Burrow until January 2022, following the Titans game, more than a year after he was drafted. Burrow and Taylor consider themselves friends more than anything. Coach allows quarterback to be himself, both in designing plays that create a sense of comfort and not micromanaging him as a person. In that way, the two keep each other level. Just as they are devoted to their tentpoles of stability outside of football, they seem to create that repose in one another.

SUPER TURNAROUNDS

The Bengals made their third Super Bowl last year after a 4-11-1 mark in 2020. It wasn't the first time Cincinnati rebounded from a bad record to play for the Lombardi Trophy. In 1987 the Bengals went 4–11. The following year **ICKEY WOODS** and the gang shuffled to the AFC title. And in 1981, Cincy won the AFC coming off a 6–10 season, giving the franchise three of the seven most impressive turnarounds by a Super Bowl team in history.



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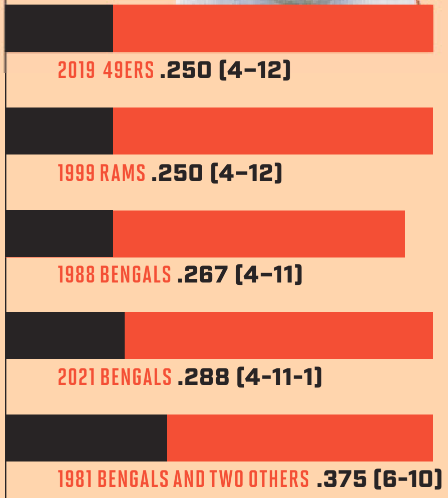
*Super Bowl team and previous-year record



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Taylor held on to his own rituals, like the afternoon visits from his family every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Sarah would pile their four kids into the SUV and drive up to the offices with two venti Pike Roasts from Starbucks. They'd all sit and just talk. After the kids were in bed, they'd fall back on reruns of *New Girl*, which Zac watches to zone out and calm down (he's seen each episode 100 times, says Sarah).

Sarah remembers waking up the morning after Cincinnati earned its trip to the Super Bowl to a flurry of text messages from friends in the drop-off line at school: *Is Zac seriously dropping the kids off right now?* He had walked in the door after 2 a.m., then responded to a mountain of congratulatory messages. She never actually saw him fall asleep, and then he was gone by 6, whisking the kids away to school.

"Being gone for a couple of hours isn't going to dictate whether you win or lose that week," Taylor says. "But it will matter to your kids and it will matter to you. Make sure that emotional tank is filled up."

Even Mike Brown, the team's gruff and reclusive owner, felt the surge brought on by sudden success. In the aftermath of the AFC title-game victory in Kansas City, the then 86-year-old sat at the front of the team bus, in a daze. It was all finally happening. Brown had fallen into a generational quarterback from the Buckeye State who took the Bengals' history of futility as a personal challenge. He had hired a coach whose wife talked about Cincinnati with the affinity most vacationers save for Martha's Vineyard. While everyone outside the organization was envisioning Taylor's ouster after a 6-25-1 start, Brown's wife, Nancy, was busy shopping for Sarah's favorite scented soap for Christmas 2020.

Whether consciously or not, they all found a separate peace as the entire thing gained an unstoppable momentum, just like their quarterback. They could retreat into family, into themselves, into their big dreams and grand plots, into scented gift soaps and little human interactions that made the weight of what was happening seem manageable.

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AS A SENIOR at Athens High School, Burrow's team lost the state championship game, 56–52, to the heavily favored Toledo Central Catholic (a game in which Burrow threw for six touchdowns). That day in 2015 he told the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*: "[This is] the worst day of my life. Not much more to be said."

"I remember Joe telling me after that game, 'This is the worst feeling I've ever had,' and I gotta say I kinda agreed," says Burrow's high school coach, Nathan White. "At that moment, it is the worst thing you could possibly feel, you know?"

Before Super Bowl LVI, when he wasn't working out, recovering or watching film, Burrow began binge-streaming the NFL Network series *A Football Life*. One episode in particular, on Hall of Fame quarterback Kurt Warner, stuck with him.

Warner, a family friend who played on the Iowa Barnstormers of the Arena Football League when Burrow's father was the team's defensive coordinator, said that one of his major regrets in life was not celebrating the Rams' Super Bowl loss to New England. There is so much good leading up to that moment. Why sit in a corner and pout?

And so, on Feb. 13, minutes after Aaron Donald had

CARRYING MOMENTUM
Hauled off in Kansas City (above), Burrow had a run through three quarters in Super Bowl LVI (right).

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (CARRIED OFF); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SUPER BOWL)

spun him around and forced his fourth-down pass to bounce off the turf on the Super Bowl's clinching play, Burrow revealed one of the critical philosophies culled from his pared-down existence.

"It didn't come out the way we wanted it to, but I think we still have something to celebrate," he said.

Burrow danced (albeit awkwardly) at the Bengals' afterparty, on stage with one of his favorite musicians, rapper Kid Cudi. When he got home he opted not to pick up a football for a while. He stepped away from the game, securing a mindset: What had happened last winter was awesome, not some sad song—losing the damn Super Bowl—to be played in his mind over and over again.

"You just grow and mature and understand that we're going to lose some games and have some bad days," he says. "It just so happened that the game was the Super Bowl. . . . You have to learn how to win and learn how to lose. You have to learn to take those losses and move on from them."

For the Bengals, 2022 will be defined by a resiliency born out of that mindset.

ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHHHHH.
ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHH.
ONE . . . TWO . . . FSHHHHHHHHHHH.

After a few minutes, Burrow's time in the jungle is over. If the feeling now is any indication, we will see him playing meaningful football deep into winter after winter. Another Super Bowl run? Why the hell not?

The heat and the light will always be there now. Burrow understands this. He'll spend his time systematically approaching it and then backing away, understanding that it is both the prize and the pitfall. When asked whether it might ever start to feel normal, he doesn't hesitate.

"Never in a million years." □

Pain in the Knee: How to Minimize the Impact of Osteoarthritis

We all know the feeling. Creaky knees. A sore shoulder. Pain in your hips. It comes after sitting too long, or walking for a while, or from doing just about anything, really. Usually, we'll just chalk that kind of pain up to a particularly intense game, long run, or some other physical activity. Maybe even just getting old. Certainly, those things can contribute to how we're feeling, but it may be something more specific:

Osteoarthritis.

Osteoarthritis occurs when the protective cartilage in your joints wears away[1] due to the wear and tear on your joints from physical activity. This wear and tear can eventually lead to pain, swelling, tenderness, loss of flexibility, and even bone spurs.[2] Typically, these symptoms develop slowly and over time, depending on your level of physical activity.[2] High-impact exercises like running and jumping can take a toll, whether you're a young adult, athlete or "weekend warrior." Osteoarthritis can happen to anyone.

How you manage your osteoarthritis symptoms—and whether those symptoms get worse—can be the difference between hanging up your equipment or staying in the game as long as possible.

For those who want to stay in the game, choosing the right interventions is key. This might include lifestyle changes, surgery, oral treatment or topical creams/gels, like PENNSAID (diclofenac sodium topical solution) 2%. It's a reality Dr. Jake Zarah, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and a specialist in the treatment of osteoarthritis, sees every day when speaking to his patients. He says the importance of early attention to symptoms of osteoarthritis, and in particular the knees, can be the key to minimizing the impact it can have on your joints—and life. This can be particularly important as we get older.

There are several things one can do to delay the impact of osteoarthritis. The first thing he suggests is to change the kinds of physical activity you're engaging in that causes the symptoms of osteoarthritis. That may mean less basketball, running and football, but more swimming, elliptical, biking, and strength exercises like yoga.[2]

"Weight loss can help slow the progression of arthritis and its symptoms, minimizing the wear and tear on your joints," says Dr. Zarah. He points out that every one pound of body weight lost equals about a five-pound reduction of force on your joints. So, even a minimal amount of weight loss can mean a huge difference, especially for your knees and hips.

Eventually, though, mitigating measures are just not enough. You have to find the right way to manage your symptoms. That can range from something as simple as over-the-counter pain medicine to anti-inflammatory treatments, injections and even surgery, which is often a last resort.

> **"Weight loss can help slow the progression of arthritis and its symptoms, minimizing the wear and tear on your joints"**
> — *Dr. Zarah.*

"When experiencing osteoarthritic symptoms, your first step may be to try over-the-counter anti-inflammatory treatments," says Dr. Zarah. "It's by far the most common treatment for most patients. But that doesn't mean it's the right treatment for everyone."

Anti-inflammatory treatments that patients can administer themselves come in two forms. The first is an oral medication, like a pill, and is more of a systemic treatment. Oral anti-inflammatory properties affect the entire body systemically. It can also be risky to take oral anti-inflammatories with blood thinners, which athletes sometimes use, and they can cause side effects in the stomach and intestines that can significantly impact athletes while they're training or performing.

The second option is a topical gel or cream, that offers targeted anti-inflammatory osteoarthritis treatment benefits. Dr. Zarah explains, "Some of my patient-athletes and their doctors prefer topical anti-inflammatory treatments because it lets them apply treatment directly to the affected area—reducing systemic exposure that may prevent them from performing at their peak ability."

In Dr. Zarah's practice, he prescribes PENNSAID 2%, a topical nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) designed to target osteoarthritis knee pain by delivering relief directly at the site.[3] It can be applied to the front, back, and sides of the knee(s) where it is absorbed through the skin.[4] This allows it to target the source of pain while reducing the amount of medicine that reaches other parts of the body.[4] In a study, patients reported an improvement in their OA knee pain with the treatment.[4]

"I believe that PENNSAID 2% is a good choice for several reasons: It is effective in treating the symptoms of osteoarthritis, and it can be added to an athlete's routine so easily, applied twice a day for possible symptom relief," Dr. Zarah advises.

If you're an athlete or just like to stay active and suffer from knee pain, it may be helpful to discuss PENNSAID 2% with your doctor today. Learn more about OA and PENNSAID at **pennsaid.com.**

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INDICATIONS AND USAGE

What is PENNSAID® (diclofenac sodium topical solution) 2% w/w?

PENNSAID® (diclofenac sodium topical solution) 2% w/w is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) applied to the skin, used for treating the pain of osteoarthritis of the knee(s).

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION

What is the most important information I should know about PENNSAID?

- NSAIDs can cause an increased risk of a heart attack or stroke that can lead to death. This risk may occur early in treatment and may increase with longer use and with increasing doses.
- NSAIDs can cause an increased risk of bleeding, ulcers, and tears (perforation) of the esophagus, stomach and intestines. These events can occur at any time during use, without warning symptoms and may cause death. Elderly patients and patients with a history of ulcer disease or stomach or intestine bleeding are at greater risk for getting an ulcer or bleeding.
- You should take PENNSAID exactly as prescribed, at the lowest dose possible and for the shortest time needed.

PENNSAID can cause serious side effects. Stop taking PENNSAID and call your doctor or go to your emergency department right away if you get:

- Difficulty breathing, swelling of the face or throat. These could be signs of a serious allergic reaction.
- Chest pain, shortness of breath, weakness in one part or side of your body, or slurring of speech. These could be signs of a serious blood clotting event.
- Upper stomach pain, upset stomach, black, tarry stools, or vomiting of blood. These could be signs of an esophagus, stomach, or intestinal ulcer, bleed, or tear. Note: if you are also taking low-dose aspirin, you are at increased risk for esophagus, stomach, or intestinal bleeding.
- Nausea, more tired or weaker than usual, itching, yellowing of the skin or eyes, right upper abdomen tenderness, and “flu-like” symptoms. These could be signs of a liver problem.
- Shortness of breath, unexplained weight gain, or swelling of the arms, legs, hands or feet. These could be signs of a serious heart problem.
- Any type of rash. This could be a sign of a serious skin reaction.

These are not all of the possible side effects of PENNSAID. Please talk to your doctor if you experience any symptoms that bother you or that do not go away.

Who should not use PENNSAID?

DO NOT USE PENNSAID if you

- are in the hospital for a certain heart surgery called coronary artery bypass graft surgery.
- know you are allergic to diclofenac or any other ingredient of PENNSAID.
- have experienced asthma, hives, or allergic-type reactions after taking aspirin or other NSAIDs. Serious allergic reactions to NSAIDs, including death, have been reported in such patients.
- are in the 30th week of pregnancy until delivery

How should I use PENNSAID?

PENNSAID is applied directly to the front, back, and sides of your knee(s). Avoid contact of PENNSAID with the eyes, nose, and mouth. If eye contact occurs, immediately wash out the eye with water and contact your health care provider if irritation persists for more than an hour. Avoid skin-to-skin contact between other people and the knee(s) to which PENNSAID was applied until the knee(s) is completely dry. **DO NOT** apply PENNSAID to open wounds, infections, or rashes. **DO NOT** shower for at least 30 minutes after applying PENNSAID or wear clothing over the PENNSAID treated knee(s) until the treated knee(s) is dry. **DO** wash and dry hands before and after use, protect your treated knee(s) from natural or artificial sunlight, and wait until the treated knee(s) is completely dry before applying sunscreen, insect repellant, lotion, moisturizer, cosmetics, or other topical medication.

What are the possible side effects of PENNSAID?

The most common side effects of PENNSAID are application site reactions, such as dryness, peeling, redness, itching, pain, skin hardening, rash, blisters, and scabbing. Other side effects are bladder infection, bruising, sinus congestion, nausea, upset stomach, stomach pain, gas, constipation, and diarrhea.

What other medications might interact with PENNSAID?

Avoid using PENNSAID while taking other NSAIDs unless your doctor says it is OK. NSAIDs may be present in over-the-counter medications for treatment of colds, fever, or insomnia; refer to the label of over-the-counter medications you are taking or ask your pharmacist. Do not use PENNSAID and low-dose aspirin until you talk to your health care provider. Tell your doctor about all of the medicines you take as some medicines can react with NSAIDs and cause serious side effects.

What should I tell my health care provider?

Before starting PENNSAID, tell your health care provider if you have a history of ulcer disease or esophagus, stomach, or intestine bleeding, liver or kidney problems, high blood pressure, asthma, or are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or breast feeding. Taking NSAIDs, such as PENNSAID, at about 20 weeks of pregnancy or later may harm your unborn baby. If you need to use PENNSAID for more than 2 days when you are between 20 and 30 weeks of pregnancy, your healthcare provider may need to monitor the amount of fluid in your womb around your baby. You should not use PENNSAID after about 30 weeks of pregnancy. Also tell your doctor about all of the medicines you take, including prescription or over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or herbal supplements. Do not start taking new medicines without talking to your health care provider first.

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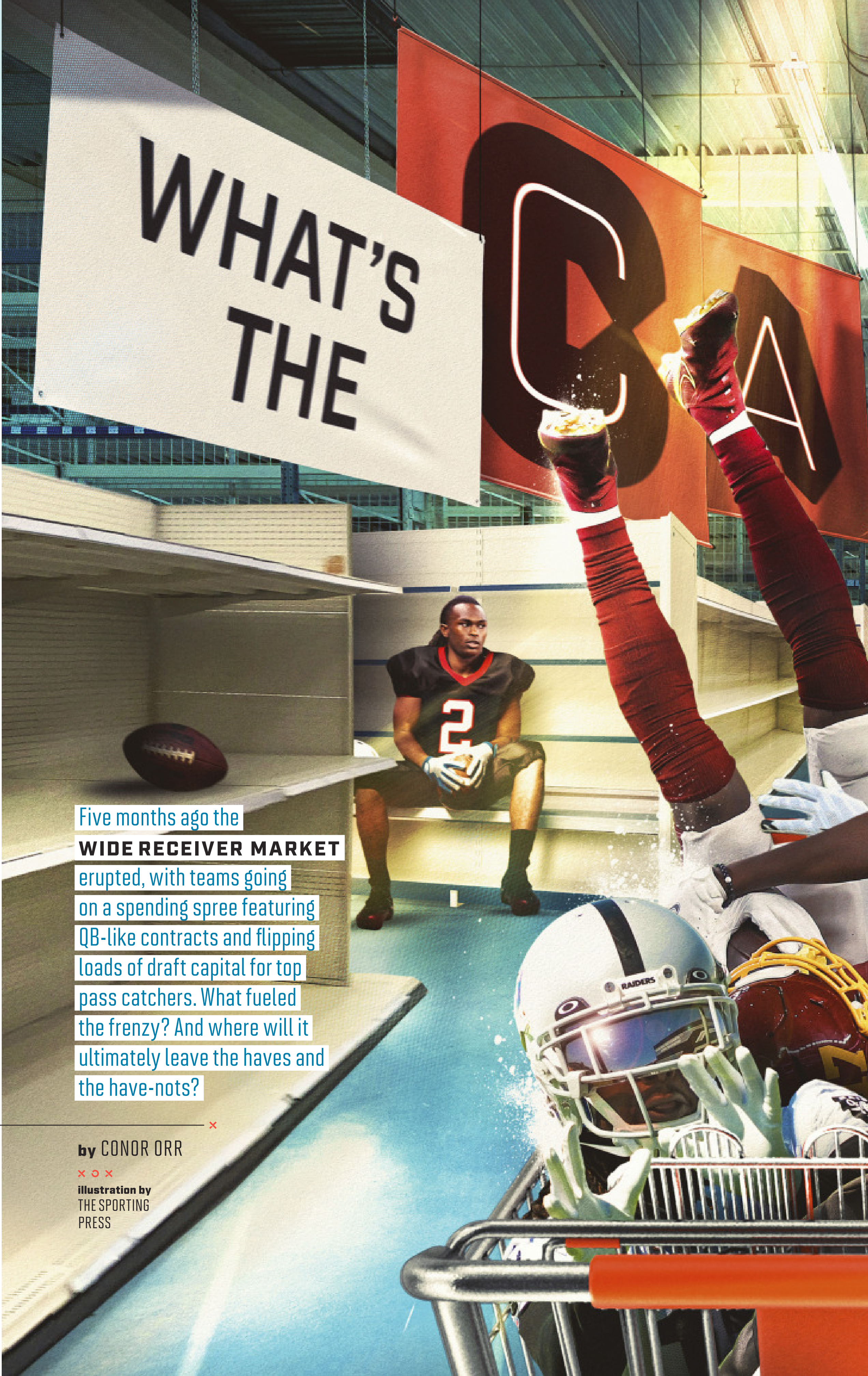

Five months ago the **WIDE RECEIVER MARKET** erupted, with teams going on a spending spree featuring QB-like contracts and flipping loads of draft capital for top pass catchers. What fueled the frenzy? And where will it ultimately leave the haves and the have-nots?

by CONOR ORR

illustration by THE SPORTING PRESS

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JOSEPH SHINN was sure, in his heart, that if we all just acted sensibly during the nascent stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be plenty of toilet paper for everyone.

Most people, he says, knew what was right. Be human. Don't race up and down the shelves gobbling up all the paper products. But most people also knew that most other people wouldn't act in the interest of a greater good. Someone was going to start hoarding. And when someone else started hoarding, we were all going to start hoarding.

"I'm an economist, and I didn't overdo it, but I went out and bought a little extra," says Shinn, who has his Ph.D. in economics. "Because I knew that if everyone was going to be irrational, if I didn't take these steps, I was going to fall into that issue."

Meaning: He'd be "literally up s---'s creek."

This is Shinn's way of explaining what may have happened at the wide receiver position this offseason in the NFL. Shinn, who dabbles in the economics of labor markets, public health and housing, is also a fantasy football fanatic who teaches courses in sports economics at Rutgers. Like the rest of us, he observed the Jaguars' signing of Christian Kirk—a player who has never logged a 1,000-yard season—to a four-year, $72 million deal. He saw the Raiders trade first- and second-round picks for Davante Adams, signing the 29-year-old to a five-year, $140 million contract. And he saw the Dolphins acquire Tyreek Hill, spending first-, second- and fourth-round picks in 2022, plus fourth- and sixth-round picks in '23, and sign him to a four-year contract worth $120 million. (He'll be the first receiver to earn $30 million in a season.) Then there was draft night. The Cardinals traded a first-round pick for Ravens receiver Marquise Brown, and the Eagles traded first- and third-rounders for A.J. Brown, signing him to a four-year deal worth $100 million. (Additionally: Six receivers were drafted in the top 20, including two by teams that traded up for the privilege. Only nine times in NFL history—two in the last three years—have that many receivers gone in the first round.)

Executives gobbled up veterans at the position seemingly without care for financial norms or precedent. The average wide receiver salary ballooned. For years, wideouts had been viewed as a luxury. Unscientific studies of past Super Bowl champions (specifically, the Patriots) revealed a cast of mostly anonymous role-playing pass catchers. Between 2000 and '20, only once had a Super Bowl team employed the NFL's leading wide receiver (Torry Holt, of the Rams, in '01). But then Super Bowl LV featured top-of-the-line pass catchers like Hill, with the Chiefs, and the Buccaneers' Mike Evans, Antonio Brown and Chris Godwin. Super Bowl LVI? The Rams' Cooper Kupp, who led the league in receptions and yards; and the Bengals' Ja'Marr Chase, the NFL Rookie of the Year.

The fear of missing out is real, and intense. The market's ebbs and flows lead consumers to buy now, pay more and abandon potential best practices in the process. These waves of societal consumption, be it with new cars, foam mattresses, backyard pools or kettle bell weights, hit us one after the next. (Shinn cautions that housing is a bit different.) The same seems to be true of NFL GMs, who looked at the wide receiver market and then mashed the bright-red panic button.

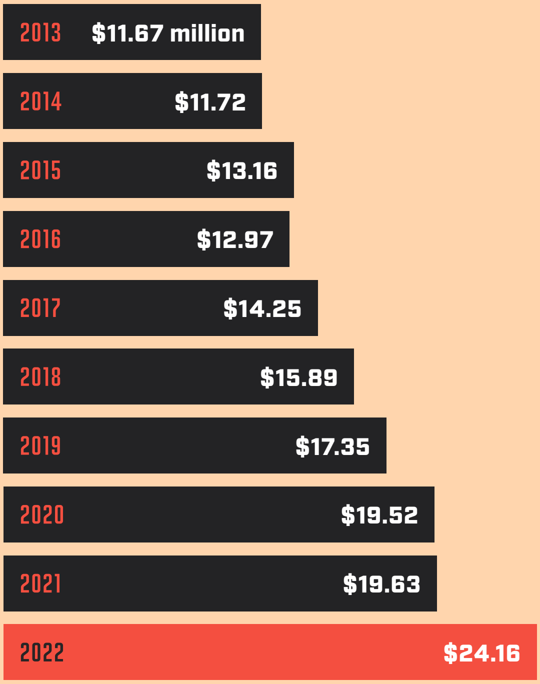
"Everyone saw it happening quickly and said, 'If everyone is going to do it, I better do it now—or else

PREVIOUS SPREAD: JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (JONES HEAD); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (HILTON HEAD); ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES (HILTON BODY); TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES (MCLAURIN); LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES (MOORE); MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); DAVID ROSENBLUM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (KIRK); JOEL AUERBACH/GETTY IMAGES (HILL)

JASEN VINLOVE/USA TODAY SPORTS

CASH IN HANDS

How much more are top wideouts making? Here's the average of the NFL's top 10 WR salaries by season, over the past 10 years. (Source: overthecap.com)



I'll be without the quality player I need,' " Shinn says.

But while a sizable chunk of the league did pony up for elite receivers, a couple of the NFL's best teams from 2021 decided they weren't willing to pay the going price. Which means that this season will help point us toward some answers to these questions, and in real time: Are great receivers essential for a great offense, or will the system carry the day? Or, in short, did all these teams really need to run to the supermarket and clear out the aisles?

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WHILE THIS offseason's run on receivers was a leaguewide trend, let's momentarily narrow the lens to four teams: the 49ers, Packers, Titans and Dolphins.

Each of the above runs a version of the same offense, which was recycled in the NFL by Kyle Shanahan, coach of the 49ers. Shanahan learned the offense from his father, Mike, and Mike's offensive line coach, Alex Gibbs, who together ran the stretch-running, play-action-heavy scheme en route to two straight Super Bowl victories with the Broncos in the late 1990s. Packers coach Matt LaFleur worked with Kyle and Mike Shanahan in Washington, and then with Kyle in Atlanta, and he brought the offense to Tennessee for a year as coordinator before taking the Packers' top job in 2019. The Titans simply retained the offense after LaFleur left, handing it down to their next two play-callers: first coordinator Arthur Smith (now coach of the Falcons) and then Todd Downing, their current coordinator. Finally, first-year Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel was the younger Shanahan's longest-tenured associate, having been Kyle's run-game guru for more than half a decade at various stops.

Despite running similar systems, each team behaved differently when it came to the wide receiver gold rush. The Packers traded away Adams, far and away Aaron Rodgers's favorite target for the past four seasons, and added journeyman free agent Sammy Watkins, plus a second-round rookie, Christian Watson out of FCS program North Dakota State. The Titans traded away Brown, their leading receiver in each of his three NFL seasons, and drafted a replacement, Arkansas's Treylon Burks, in the first round. The 49ers, meanwhile, refused to trade away their star wide receiver, Deebo Samuel, despite a bustling market and Samuel's open desire to leave San Francisco. The Dolphins traded for Hill, less than a year after drafting similarly speedy Jaylen Waddle with the 2021 draft's sixth pick.

Scoping this scene, similar conclusions were reached by three people who spoke to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: an NFL personnel executive, a coach who's deeply familiar with the Shanahan offense and a high-profile agent (SI granted them anonymity in exchange for their candor). While the moves may look like they were made under the same roster-building logic, they could easily be separate reactions to individual problems. The 49ers, for example, likely wanted to keep Samuel because they planned to start second-year quarterback Trey Lance, who would benefit from the assistance of elite pass-catching talent. The Dolphins, who are trying to ignite the career of QB Tua Tagovailoa *(page 50)*, the fifth pick of the 2020 draft, were willing to pay the price for Hill. The Packers have Rodgers and can trust that he will buoy the talent around him. And, as with any situation in the NFL, there is always a murkiness as to whether ownership wants to hand over market-altering money. Replacing Brown (who would go on to say that the Titans' contract-extension offer to him was far below what he ultimately attained in Philadelphia) with an unproven rookie is a risk, but there's an argument that it makes more business sense for the Titans.

The agent who spoke to SI added that the receiver market had been unrealistically stagnant for too long, and that the position was due for a market correction. Now, Hill and Adams are among the 20 highest-paid players in the sport for 2022 (Nos. 13 and 17, respectively). Along with left tackle, pass rusher and cornerback are often considered the premium non-quarterback positions. Yet, Hill and Adams are each set to make as much as or more than T.J. Watt and Myles Garrett, the two best pass rushers in football; and each is set to make nearly $10 million more in '22 than the league's highest-paid corner, Green Bay's Jaire Alexander.

> The rookie route is a means to get the good toilet paper at a pre-pandemic price, not from some **SEEDY PRICE GOUGER ON CRAIGSLIST.** One GM who did not select a wide receiver in the early rounds of the draft said that he lamented it simply from an economic standpoint.

Whatever the explanation, this cluster of decisions helped electrify the market. Backdropped against a much larger and far-reaching clamor for wide receivers, the variance in decision-making and homogeneity in offensive philosophy between these four teams gives us a chance to discover what the value of a receiver is. If the Dolphins rapidly improve, if the Packers and Titans falter, if the 49ers ultimately regret passing on the chance to trade Samuel, the outcome will influence the future of league behavior.

Consider: Roughly 40% of the league's offensive play-callers are somehow connected to the Shanahan offense and are borrowing heavily from its concepts. Imagine being able to prove by some pseudo-concrete measure that an offense produces its playmakers, and not the other way around. Imagine demonstrating a desperate need for certain talent to make the most popular offensive scheme in the NFL function properly. Returning to Shinn's metaphor: Imagine a perpetual toilet paper shortage that, for some teams, lasts not months, but years.

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WHEN IT COMES to trading high-profile wideouts, there's a grim track record for teams on the receiving end. Odell Beckham Jr. to the Browns (for a first- and third-round pick), Julio Jones to the Titans (second- and fourth-round with a sixth-rounder coming back), Antonio Brown to the Raiders (third- and fifth-round), Percy Harvin to the Seahawks (first-, third- and seventh-round), Roy Williams to the Cowboys (first-, third- and sixth-round) and Joey Galloway to the Cowboys (two first-rounders) all cast a heavy shadow over the relatively few successful trades (Stefon Diggs to the Bills, DeAndre Hopkins to the Cardinals, Terrell Owens to the Eagles . . .).

One general manager who did not select a wide receiver in the early rounds of the 2022 draft said that he lamented that fact simply from an economic standpoint. Here was a way to try to get something cheap. Example: The first receiver drafted in '22, USC's Drake London, is making roughly $5.3 million per year on his rookie contract for the Falcons, which is less than, for instance, Jets veteran slot receiver Braxton Berrios. London could be just as effective as the pass catchers that some teams are paying $30 million a year, but at less than 20% of the cost.

Even beyond the first round, the draft has produced no shortage of stars at the position over the past couple of seasons. Samuel and Brown, plus the Seahawks' DK Metcalf, Commanders' Terry McLaurin and Steelers' Diontae Johnson all went on the second day of the 2019 draft. The '20 draft's second round included Cincinnati's Tee Higgins, Indianapolis's Michael Pittman Jr. and Pittsburgh's Chase Claypool. And the rookie wage scale locked them into contracts that average roughly $1 million per season over four years, with no chance to renegotiate until after their third year in the league.

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In that way, the rookie route is a means to get the good toilet paper at a pre-pandemic price, not from some seedy price-gouger on Craigslist. This attitude, which seems to be sensible for any market-savvy GM adept at noticing trends, makes the exploding veteran receiver market even harder to understand.

In fact, we have a fairly good idea of how likely a given team is to hit on a first-round wide receiver, and it appears to be getting better. Of the receivers drafted in the first round between 2000 and '19, just 27% have reached the Pro Bowl at any point, over the course of 20 seasons. For the '20 and '21 drafts the rate is the same, 27%—three out of 11—already.

This could explain why the GM that SI spoke to was sore about missing out. Or why, for instance, the Saints traded for additional draft capital in 2022—which many viewed as offering a weak overall draft—to select Ohio State's Chris Olave.

Or, think of it this way: The Titans took a first-round pick in exchange for Brown, knowing they would draft Burks. Both are signed to four-year contracts. But Burks's deal is worth 14% of the average annual value and 25% of the total guarantees of Brown's . . . with a 27% chance of being almost as good.

"[Some teams] are making clear economic decisions," says Donn Johnson, chair of the economics department at Quinnipiac. "Receiver prices are hitting $30 million . . . or you can draft one in the first round [and] you're not paying anything close to that amount of money. The calculation in their head is that they may only have a 50% chance of hitting, but they're only paying that person $4 million [annually]."

Back in 2008, Johnson and his co-author, Matthew Rafferty, were putting the finishing touches on an economic paper entitled "Is the NFL Draft a Crap Shoot? The Case of Wide Receivers and Running Backs" when Rafferty, a revered economics professor at Quinnipiac, died. (Johnson plans to finish the paper with the help of Ramapo College economics professor Alexandre Olbrecht, a fellow football data obsessive.)

OLD FACES, NEW PLACES

The cash flowed to receivers and also to a select group of aging defensive stars who changed teams

BY ALBERT BREER

VON MILLER

EDGE ▸ BILLS (AGE 33)

The hope is, with his ankle injuries in the rear view, Buffalo is getting the healthier version of Miller that reemerged as a terror down the stretch and into the playoffs for the Rams last year. If he's as good physically and mentally as he's reported to be, he should be great for the Bills' young cadre of edge defenders.

CHANDLER JONES

EDGE ▸ RAIDERS (AGE 32)

Las Vegas is banking on what Jones is known to be—a big, long, strong and complete edge defender. With the arsenal of rush moves he's built up, plus his consistency, Jones should make his presence felt by teams focused on stopping the Raiders' younger star rusher, Maxx Crosby.

FROM LEFT: RICH BARNES/USA TODAY SPORTS; JOHN LOCHER/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

And Johnson and Rafferty found that the information that exists for scouts is a fairly solid determinant in future success. For example: A team that drafted a player high on the board of *Pro Football Weekly* draft savant Joel Buchsbaum—someone with, say, an 8 out of 9 on Buchsbaum's grading scale—had an 8.3% greater chance of landing a future Pro Bowler than if they'd drafted a 7 on Buchsbaum's scale. This is their data-driven way of saying that most of the information the draft machine produces—a consensus of scouting and executive groupthink, along with combine measurements, collegiate stats and relevant athletic information—can give you a fair educated guess at receiver success.

Another recent study by Conor McQuiston, an analytics intern for the Cardinals, shows that wide receivers drafted in the first round tend to outperform second-round picks only slightly, extending the position's range of value beyond a first-round pick. A third study, by *Pro Football Focus* data scientist Timo Riske, shows that receivers take less time to get used to the NFL and succeed faster than most of their positional counterparts.

Today's college game "features much more throwing," says Johnson. "It's helping [NFL] teams gauge players better than in the past."

This drives at the heart of what Shinn was saying about toilet paper. NFL teams know this information. They know the hit rates. They know the acclimation rates. They know that, on average, for every four financially responsible swings they take at the position via the draft, they'll have a player they are paying a fraction of what they'd have to spend on Adams or Hill, with a statistically similar output. They know, in their hearts, the right thing to do.

In certain circumstances, teams cannot help themselves. And yet, sometimes, feeling like you're up s---'s creek is the catalyst for a brilliant decision. If economists can get caught up in the toilet paper rush, and the Bucs and the Rams have been hoarding receivers for years, how bad can it really be? □

FROM LEFT: MATTHEW HINTON/AP; ZACH BOLINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA/GETTY IMAGES; MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

TYRANN MATHIEU

S ▸ SAINTS (AGE 30)

The New Orleans front office brought in Mathieu to take Malcolm Jenkins's place, so there should be a blueprint to maximize him. He has lost some range and can't cover out of the slot the way he did earlier in his career, but he is still an incredibly instinctive playmaker.

STEPHON GILMORE

CB ▸ COLTS (AGE 31)

Thanks to injuries and a midseason trade to the Panthers, Gilmore was a part-time player last year, and he isn't the same guy he was a few seasons ago. But going to Indy could breathe new life into his career. Gilmore's length and savvy make him a good fit for new defensive coordinator Gus Bradley's scheme.

BOBBY WAGNER

LB ▸ RAMS (AGE 32)

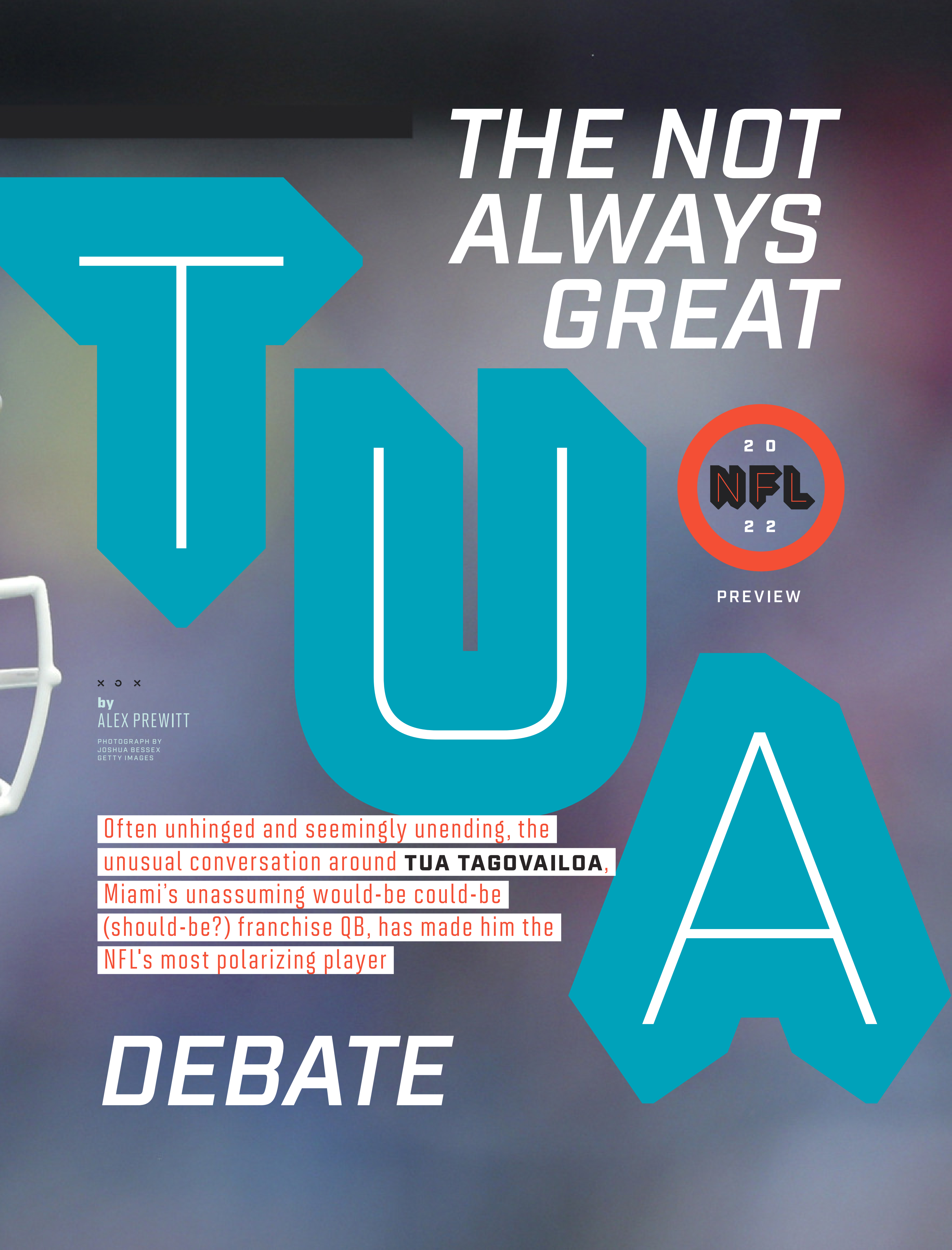
In Seattle, Wagner was Mr. Everything, and he has shown over the past few years that, even if he's lost a step, he's still got plenty of juice left. The good news is, in Los Angeles he'll be entering into a very linebacker-friendly scheme that isn't going to ask quite as much athletically of him.

KHALIL MACK

EDGE ▸ CHARGERS (AGE 31)

Mack's toe injury contributed to his workload dropping from 894 snaps in 2020 to 315 last year with the Bears. Even when he's healthy, Mack's not as explosive as he was. But he's still physical, versatile and tough, and he'll be a lot to deal with—especially with Joey Bosa opposite him.

MIAMI
TAGOVAILOA



THE NOT ALWAYS GREAT TUA DEBATE

by
ALEX PREWITT

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOSHUA BESSEX
GETTY IMAGES

Often unhinged and seemingly unending, the unusual conversation around **TUA TAGOVAILOA**, Miami’s unassuming would-be could-be (should-be?) franchise QB, has made him the NFL's most polarizing player

MOST OFTEN, whenever Stephen A. Smith sparks up his signature burn, it is in reaction to cannabis-specific situations in the sports world: a positive test, an arrest, news of that nature. But the topic du jour on June 13 so inflated ESPN's most prominent gasbag that he made an exception, puffing on *First Take*, "You gonna try to tell me a dude that you've never even played a preseason game with is more accurate than Patrick Mahomes? If you are really, really serious about that, I'm sorry, I'm gonna say this on national television: Stay off the *weeeeeeeeeeed-uh*."

In a scornful, singsong tone, Smith stretched out the last word for 4.78 seconds—or, about half a second longer than it takes the man who inspired the rant to run a 40-yard dash. Yet for all of Tyreek Hill's supersonic speed, it's possible that the Dolphins receiver known as Cheetah has never sprinted anywhere faster than the offseason's mad scramble to defend his new quarterback. "Obviously, I'm gonna go with [Mahomes] as the strongest arm," Hill declared on his nascent podcast, *It Needed to Be Said*. "But as far as accuracy-wise, I'm going with Tua all day."

To no one's surprise, talking heads starved for summer content swiftly spat out takes. In addition to spinning through the ESPN car wash, Hill's comments received dedicated segments on NBC Sports Radio's *ProFootballTalk* (14 minutes), FS1's *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed* (12) and, in a rare moment of restraint for the punter turned perpetually tank-topped YouTuber, merely seven minutes on the *Pat McAfee Show*. The conclusions ranged from half-baked jokes about Hill being high to more charitable readings of the quote.

Tua Tagovailoa has one ring, from the night he came off the bench as a true freshman to lead Alabama past Georgia in the January 2018 national title game.

FANTASTIC FIN-ISH
With Tagovailoa back under center, Miami went 7–1 down the stretch in '21.

SAM NAVARRO/USA TODAY SPORTS

The circus of discourse regarding his play has added two more. This isn't due to anything the soft-spoken Tagovailoa has said, his public comments typically as bland as the Muscle Milk he endorses. Rather it is born from a unique blend of what he has (or hasn't) done, who he is (or isn't), and how a year of relentless hype invigorated a Dolphins fan base desperate for him (or anyone, really) to take control of a franchise that has started 23 quarterbacks since Dan Marino retired 22 years ago. As *Palm Beach Post* beat writer and industry veteran Joe Schad tweeted last November, "Tua Tagovailoa is by far the most polarizing athlete I've ever covered."

Staunch supporters point to a variety of factors—Tagovailoa's winning pedigree, accuracy from a statistical standpoint (66.2% career completion rate, 0.1% better than Mahomes), staff and roster upheaval in Miami and the early-career struggles of one Josh Allen, whom Dolphins fans see up close twice a year—to explain their belief that the best is yet to come. The arrival of rookie coach Mike McDaniel, plucked fresh off the fruitful Shanahan tree, and a revamped supporting cast only boost that notion.

On the other side stand critics, depicting Tagovailoa as a one-trick pony proficient in few designs aside from quick run-pass option throws. They highlight his inability to beat out journeyman Ryan Fitzpatrick as a rookie and his struggles in do-or-die games in each of his two seasons. And they point to the 6' 1" Tagovailoa's lack of standout traits compared to those leading the modern arms race: Mahomes, Allen, Lamar Jackson and, yes, the man drafted a little more than seven minutes after Tua, Justin Herbert.

The clash has only crescendoed since Tagovailoa last played. There were Hill's comments, plus a clip of a mid-practice throw that became less a Rorschach test and more a test of who could roar the loudest, and the rise of a social media star sporting an unsettlingly realistic dolphin mask and digitally distorted voice. But all parties agree on this: In a league where there's increasingly little patience with young QBs, 2022 is Tagovailoa's make-or-break year.

Tua or not Tua? That is the question.

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HYPE HAS tailed Tagovailoa since he was a five-star recruit from Honolulu's Saint Louis High, drawing offers from UCLA, USC and other FBS programs before his junior year.

But it reached astronomical heights when he replaced an underperforming Jalen Hurts at halftime of the College Football Playoff title game, leading the Crimson Tide out of a 13–0 hole against Georgia before hitting a streaking DeVonta Smith for the walk-off, 41-yard touchdown in overtime.

"He had all these expectations coming out of high school," recalls Mike Locksley, then Tagovailoa's co-offensive coordinator in Tuscaloosa. "And it never seemed too big for him."

Looking back, Locksley remembers less about the mythos that solidified around Tagovailoa and more about how his pupil responded to it. After beating Hurts for the starter's spot as a sophomore going into 2018, Tagovailoa finished second behind Oklahoma's Kyler Murray in a tight Heisman race and steered the Tide to another CFB championship appearance. "I saw him get better," says Locksley, now Maryland's head coach. "When he won the job, that was where he had his coming-out party."

Heading into the 2019 season, his last at Alabama, fan bases across the NFL were buying into brouhaha and latching on to the easy alliteration: Tank for Tua. Nowhere, though, were the calls louder than in South Florida, where fans and media alike were basking in sunshine mixed with a savior complex. “There’s been too much pain and suffering for this franchise and its fan base,” the *Miami Herald*’s Omar Kelly wrote in an early-October ’19 column calling on the Dolphins to punt on that season. “One win won’t heal that. Only Tagovailoa . . . can.”

They were expectations few could have met, and indeed reality proved less starry-eyed. During his final season in Tuscaloosa, Tagovailoa fought back from ankle surgery only to go down for good with a dislocated and fractured right hip against Mississippi State in mid-November. In the end, the Bengals took LSU’s Joe Burrow with the draft’s top pick. But the wait wasn’t long: After weeks of smokescreens indicating their interest in Herbert, the Dolphins took Tagovailoa at No. 5.

Not that anyone seemed to mind. “The Dolphins have their franchise quarterback,” the *Herald* wrote. “Buy those jerseys, Dolphins fans. The new face of Miami sports is a 6-foot Hawaiian football prodigy.”

The diehards did their part: As of May 2020, Tagovailoa’s No. 1 teal and white jerseys ranked first and second in sales leaguewide. His uneven fall and winter spent replacing (and then being replaced by) Fitzpatrick did little to dampen the enthusiasm, as Tagovailoa finished his rookie season ranked fourth in jersey sales, according to the NFLPA, sharing the top five with four MVPs: Tom Brady, Mahomes, Jackson and Aaron Rodgers.

As for the proclamation that Miami had a franchise QB? That remains the crux of the conversation encircling Tagovailoa. Just ask the dude in the dolphin mask.

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A REPORTER joins his Zoom room to find his interview subject already logged in and waiting. The camera reveals an ordinary condo, light fixtures dangling over the kitchen peninsula near a slightly cluttered dining room table. Seconds later, though, the video shuts off, giving way to a modulated man’s voice speaking over a black screen bearing only his account’s name: TuAnon.

“I don’t want to give too much revealing information,” he explains, refusing to provide any personal details beyond his first name (Eric), his location (Coronado, Calif.) and his general age (30s). Then, adds the man whose public identity is built around donning a rubber dolphin mask, “People on the internet today are crazy.”

Reached via Twitter direct message, Eric also confirms that he is both the brains and the creepily altered voice behind @TheGaluminati, a viral Twitter account—a combination of “illuminati” and the first name of Tagovailoa’s father, Galu. He periodically publishes cryptic videos for its 13,000-plus followers in which Eric, playing a teal-pilled character in a dolphin mask that he bought at a Halloween store, rallies support for TuAnon, a satirical conspiracy movement theorizing, basically, that Tagovailoa has been sabotaged by his own franchise. As the account’s bio states: “Time is coming soon. You will soon see what the Miami Dolphins have done to Tua Tagovailoa.”

COURTESY OF @THEGALUMINATI

FACE, THE FACTS
A masked Eric sounded his support for Tua even as the QB struggled.

As Eric says now, “I think most people understand it’s a joke, that it is genuinely, generally, a Tua support account.”

Eric launched TuAnon last fall, as a promising win over the Patriots in the season opener turned into a seven-game losing streak and Miami fans’ social media timelines became dominated by Tagovailoa vitriol (even though the quarterback had missed three and three-quarters of those games with broken ribs). “From media, from fans, from other fan bases—everywhere there was a slight for Tua, and it felt unfair,” Eric says.

That is the Tao of TuAnon: The quarterback's first two seasons have been a master class in mismanagement at all levels of the organization. The tanking approach to the 2019 season stripped the roster of starting-caliber talent. Coach Brian Flores tabbed 68-year-old Chan Gailey to be Tagovailoa's first coordinator, while the front office added Fitzpatrick, who had played the best football of his career under Gailey in Buffalo, inviting a quarterback controversy as Tua rehabbed his hip. Flores yo-yoed Tagovailoa in and out of the lineup during a late 2020 run toward the postseason. Fitzpatrick shone but was ruled out for a must-win season finale in Buffalo due to COVID-19 protocols. Tagovailoa imploded in a 30-point loss.

Gailey resigned after the season and was replaced by a combo platter—co-offensive coordinators George Godsey and Eric Studesville, and QB coach Charlie Frye. Despite spending three top-50 picks over two drafts on the front five, the offensive line regressed; Tagovailoa suffered a rib injury absorbing a hit early in a September loss to Buffalo.

Rumors of Flores's distaste for his young quarterback's play persisted. Word leaked of the Dolphins' pursuit of Houston's Deshaun Watson, the subject of then two dozen accounts of sexual misconduct, with talks falling apart when Watson failed to settle the entirety of the civil lawsuits filed against him. Tweeted one decidedly unanonymous Dolphins fan, actor Josh Gad: "I love this Franchise through and through. BUT . . . the organization's handling of @Tua is wrong, insane & unfair." Miami was 1–7 at the time.

Then, a twist: The Dolphins got good. Tagovailoa came off the bench in a Thursday-night upset over Baltimore in early November, the second of what became a seven-game winning streak—no doubt aided by a soft schedule and stout defense—that moved Miami back into playoff contention.

Needing a January win in Nashville to keep those postseason hopes alive, Tagovailoa again collapsed in an ugly, 31-point road loss. Michael Lombardi, the former Browns general manager, claimed on his *GM Shuffle* podcast: "We've seen all the conversations that Flores basically had with Tua, where Flores told Tua at halftime of the Tennessee game . . . [H]ey, I should have picked Mac Jones. I don't think he was shy about telling him that."

But it was the coach, not the quarterback, who paid the price. In a stunning move, Flores was fired soon after a season-ending victory over the Patriots. (A few weeks later, Flores filed an explosive lawsuit against the Dolphins and the entirety of the NFL alleging racial discrimination in their hiring and firing practices.) To replace him Miami tabbed McDaniel, the savant often credited as the architect of the 49ers' innovative rushing attack. McDaniel pledged to Tagovailoa, via FaceTime while en route to his introductory press conference, that he'd "get all that greatness out of you."

The Dolphins spent five draft picks and $120 million to acquire Hill and sign him to an extension. He joins second-year speedster Jaylen Waddle to form the fastest receiving tandem in the NFL. Miami gave $75 million to former Saints left tackle Terron Armstead, the top O-lineman on the free-agent market who joins former Cowboys interior lineman Connor Williams in solidifying the front five.

"It's good to be the best at something," says Solak, a writer at *The Ringer.* "But [RPO throws are] **NOT WHAT YOU'D CHOOSE** to be the best at if you were choosing quarterback traits."

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

It was easy to get swept up in the renewed Tuamania. Especially, say, if you're working in the franchise's social media department.

* * *

THE 14-SECOND CLIP *SBNation* dubbed "the saddest Dolphins hype video possible" was posted to the team's Twitter account on May 10. Toggling in and out of slow motion, it reveals Tagovailoa, wearing a teal Dolphins bucket hat and a red practice jersey, carrying out a play-action fake with no defense on the field and taking aim deep. The ball wobbles toward its apex then flutters back to earth, where Hill, feet completely stopped in waiting, reaches backward to cradle it waist-high. True to the polarizing nature of Tua, a single throw from a spring practice session stoked both extremes.

POINT IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION In the exceptional speed of Hill and Waddle (17), Tua has what he needs.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

Some Tua apologists, perhaps overcome by the power of the tweet's accompanying rocket-ship emoji, celebrated the "highlight." Others, tongue-in-cheek (or not), pointed to it as another attempt by the organization to undercut its would-be franchise quarterback. Wondered writer Vic Tafur of *The Athletic* on Twitter, "Dolphins trolling their QB?" Hill, on his podcast, suggested it might have been done to tamp down the growing hype. Tagovailoa's critics—and most of the football-watching world—universally derided the throw as an almost-certain turnover against a live defense.

These doubters question whether he has the capability to let it fly on a consistent basis, a must considering the team's embarrassment of speed, expensive offensive line, and new scheme fully catered toward confusing opposing defenses with enough pre-snap bells and whistles so that Tagovailoa will have the time to take calculated deep shots. While he thrives on RPOs, throws to the flat and other quick-game staples (propping up his completion percentage for supporters to cite), his ability to drive the ball downfield remains unproven.

"I like Tua as a player—a good player for his skill set," says Benjamin Solak, an NFL writer for *The Ringer*. "But when you pick a QB, you're deciding the world you want to live and die in. When you draft Josh Allen, you say we want to live and die in a deep-ball, long-drop-backs, breaking-tackles-in the-pocket, [risk-taking] world.

"When you pick Tua, you live and die by that level of precision, accuracy, post-snap processing, because he'll never be in that Mahomes-Allen family of arm strength. If everything works, sick. But you're still behind the curve in terms of the play style you're getting out of your quarterback."

Last December, as the Dolphins were busy salvaging their season, Solak wrote an article headlined, TUA TAGOVAILOA IS THE BEST RPO PASSER IN THE LEAGUE—AND THAT'S ALL. In it he laid out the double-edged sword that is Tagovailoa's greatest strength. "It's good to be the best at something," Solak says now. "But that's not what you'd choose to be the best at if you were choosing quarterback traits." Solak says the response from Dolphins fans wasn't anything more outlandish, but admits, "Certainly a few people were like, 'It's crazy how you've always hated Tua forever.' But listen, man, being a dumb, irrational, insane fan on the internet is a good time."

* * *

AND WHERE does the signal-caller at the center of this maelstrom stand? Tagovailoa offered a hint during OTAs in early June, scoffing at "Twitter warriors, keyboard warriors, whatever you want to call them" for their takes on his arm while revisiting several deep-ball hookups with Hill from that day's practice. "I don't know if you guys recorded that last one to Tyreek," he told reporters at one point, reaching out and watching an invisible (no doubt tightly spiraled) pass fall into his hands. "[B]ut that looked like money."

The clapback received laughs from beat writers in the moment and plenty more fodder for hungry talking heads over the ensuing days. But many missed the most revelatory part of Tagovailoa's response, the same reason he had felt comfortable carping to *Muscle & Fitness* in an interview released earlier that week about how Miami's offense under Flores "didn't have plays specifically to push the ball down the field": Confidence comes with having help.

Gone are the excuses. Along with Hill and the O-line upgrades, Miami retained tight end Mike Gesicki with the franchise tag and went west to grab underrated ex-Cardinal Chase Edmonds and former McDaniel pupil Raheem Mostert for the backfield.

Even Tagovailoa's fiercest defenders cannot help but admit the stakes ahead are high. As Hill put it on his podcast, "In the NFL they only give you like two or three years to be a successful quarterback, especially if you're a first-round draft pick. And if you don't succeed after those years, then it's 'Kick rocks, man.' "

For what it's worth, Eric believes. Asked what he would say to Tagovailoa as the quarterback hurtles toward the biggest fall of his football life, "I'd just tell him that he is a good person, keep doing what you're doing, ignore the naysayers, and the city of Miami stands behind him. Well, I'm all the way in California. So, I guess, the city of Coronado stands behind him."

And yes, for that conversation, he'd set the dolphin mask aside. □

Legal Notice

If You Were Subject to the Data Breaches of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and Its Contractor, and You Experienced an Out-of-Pocket Loss After the Breaches, You Could Be Eligible for a Payment from a Class Action Settlement.

A settlement has been reached in a class action lawsuit about the data breaches of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management ("OPM") and its security contractor that allegedly compromised personal information of then-current and former federal government employees and contractors, as well as certain applicants for federal employment. The Defendants in the case—OPM and its contractor Peraton Risk Decision Inc. ("Peraton")—deny that they did anything wrong but have agreed to settle the lawsuit. The Court has not decided who is right.

Who's in the Settlement? You are a Class Member if your personal information was compromised as a result of the breaches of OPM's electronic information systems in 2014 and 2015 or the breach of Peraton's electronic information systems in 2013 and 2014; and if, after May 7, 2014, you suffered an out-of-pocket expense or lost Compensable Time: (1) to purchase a credit monitoring product, credit or identity theft protection product, or other product or service designed to identify or remediate the data breaches at issue in this case; (2) to access, freeze or unfreeze a credit report with a credit reporting agency; or (3) as a result of an identity theft incident or to mitigate an identity theft incident.

What does the Settlement provide? Defendants will pay $63,000,000 into a Settlement Fund, which will be distributed to Class Members who submit Valid Claims. Class Members who submit Valid Claims will receive $700 or the actual amount of the claim—whichever is higher—up to a maximum of $10,000. If the total value of all Valid Claims, plus any incentive awards to Named Plaintiffs, exceeds the Settlement Fund, then the value of those individual claims will be reduced in equal proportion.

What are your options? If you are a Settlement Class Member, you must fill out and submit a Claim Form to qualify for a payment. You can quickly and easily file your claim online at www.OPMDataBreach.com. You can also download a paper Claim Form from the website or get one by calling the Claims Administrator at 1-855-917-3567. The completed Claim Form must be submitted online or by mail postmarked no later than **December 23, 2022.**

If you are a Class Member and you don't want benefits from the Settlement, and you want to keep your right to sue Defendants on your own about the legal issues in this case, then you must take steps to get out of the Settlement. This is called excluding yourself from—or "opting out" of—the Class. If you do not exclude yourself from the Settlement, you will remain in the Class and will give up the right to sue Defendants for the claims resolved by the Settlement. Your request for exclusion must be submitted by mail postmarked by **September 9, 2022**. If you do not exclude yourself from the Settlement, you may object to the Settlement if you do not like any part of it. The deadline to object is **September 9, 2022**. The Court will hold a Fairness Hearing at **10:00 a.m.** on **October 14, 2022**. At this hearing, the Court will consider whether the Settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate. If there are objections, the Court will consider them. The Court will listen to people who have asked to speak at the hearing. You may attend at your own expense, or you may also pay your own lawyer to attend, but it is not necessary.

This notice is a summary. The Settlement Agreement and more information on the lawsuit and your rights are available at www.OPMDataBreach.com or by calling toll-free 1-855-917-3567.

EAST	
BILLS ①	13–4
PATRIOTS	10–7
DOLPHINS	8–9
JETS	6–11

SOUTH	
COLTS ②	12–5
TITANS	9–8
JAGUARS	5–12
TEXANS	4–13

NORTH	
RAVENS ③	11–6
BENGALS ⑥	11–6
BROWNS	7–10
STEELERS	6–11

WEST	
CHIEFS ④	11–6
CHARGERS ⑤	11–6
BRONCOS ⑦	10–7
RAIDERS	9–8

PLAYOFFS

WILD CARD

2 COLTS *over* BRONCOS 7
3 RAVENS *over* BENGALS 6
5 CHARGERS *over* CHIEFS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND

1 BILLS *over* CHARGERS 5
3 RAVENS *over* COLTS 2

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

1 BILLS *over* RAVENS 3

EAST	
COWBOYS ④	11–6
EAGLES ⑥	10–7
COMMANDERS	7–10
GIANTS	6–11

SOUTH	
BUCCANEERS ①	13–4
SAINTS	9–8
PANTHERS	5–12
FALCONS	3–14

NORTH	
PACKERS ③	11–6
LIONS ⑦	9–8
VIKINGS	7–10
BEARS	3–14

WEST	
49ERS ②	12–5
RAMS ⑤	11–6
CARDINALS	9–8
SEAHAWKS	3–14

PLAYOFFS

WILD CARD

2 49ERS *over* LIONS 7
3 PACKERS *over* EAGLES 6
4 COWBOYS *over* RAMS 5

DIVISIONAL ROUND

1 BUCCANEERS *over* COWBOYS 4
3 PACKERS *over* 49ERS 2

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

1 BUCCANEERS *over* PACKERS 3

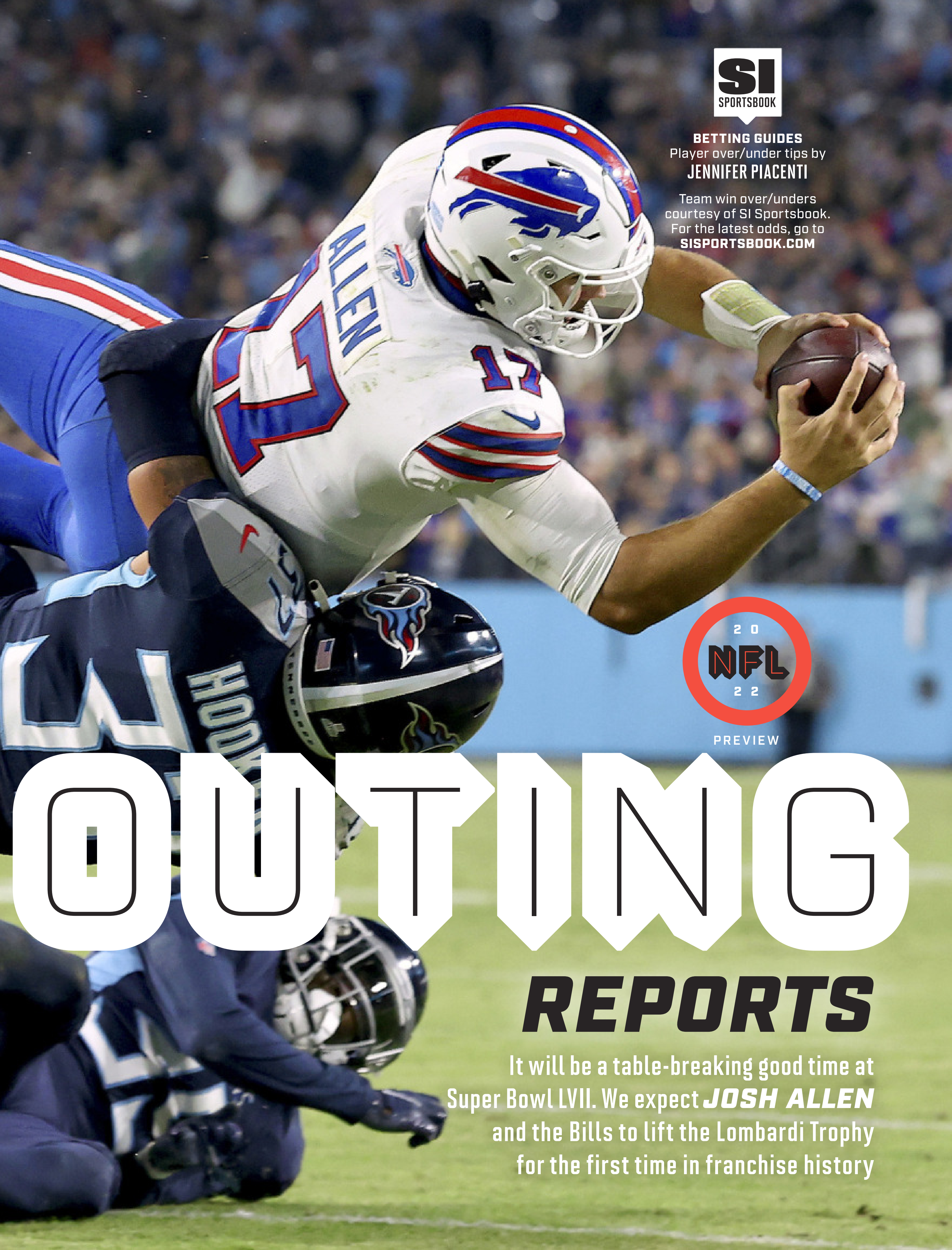
SUPER BOWL LVII

Feb. 12, 2023 State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz.

1 BILLS *over* BUCCANEERS 1

● AFC Seed
● NFC Seed

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES



SI SPORTSBOOK

BETTING GUIDES
Player over/under tips by
JENNIFER PIACENTI

Team win over/unders
courtesy of SI Sportsbook.
For the latest odds, go to
SISPORTSBOOK.COM

2020 NFL 22 PREVIEW

OUTING REPORTS

It will be a table-breaking good time at Super Bowl LVII. We expect ***JOSH ALLEN*** and the Bills to lift the Lombardi Trophy for the first time in franchise history by CONOR ORR

TILT AT THE TOP

The Bills are primed to take over the division from the old-guard Patriots—the only team capable of posing a challenge

Mac Jones *Patriots*

CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA

▸ **LAST JANUARY** the Bills were an overtime coin flip away from a conference title game matchup at home against the Bengals. Who knows, but if they had won the toss and gotten the ball first in overtime and beaten the Chiefs, they could well have gone on to beat Cincinnati and play in the Super Bowl—and even maybe have won it. But as much as that loss hurt, the reassuring thing about being a Buffalo fan right now is that the team seems less focused on what might have been than on what is going to come next.

This offseason the Bills added one of the greatest pass rushers in NFL history in 33-year-old **Von Miller**, who had 13.5 sacks last season, including four in the playoffs as he helped the Rams to the title. They also added veteran slot receiver **Jamison Crowder** from the Jets, bolstered their tight end depth with 2017 first-round pick **O.J. Howard** from Tampa Bay, added a potential premier running back with second-round pick **James Cook** out of Georgia and drafted a cornerback in the first round, Florida's **Kaiir Elam**, who could solidify what was already one of the best secondaries in the NFL. Among the AFC elite, no team did a better job this offseason of making itself more complete than Buffalo, which, from a personnel standpoint is now neck-and-neck with the Chiefs, Bengals, Titans and Ravens.

Within the division, the Bills' chief competition is the Patriots, who will be better than the team Buffalo pummeled 47–17 in the wild-card round in January. In that game a **Bill Belichick** team was dressed down in a way not seen during the coach's 22-year tenure in New England—or in NFL history, for that matter—as the Bills scored touchdowns on each of their seven drives. This season the Patriots brought back some names from the past in offensive tackle **Trent Brown**, who won a ring in Super Bowl LIII, and 32-year-old cornerback **Malcolm Butler**, who won a pair of titles in his first stint with the team. But the question of how much better New England will be rests on the continued development of **Mac Jones**. The fifth quarterback taken in the 2021 NFL draft had no business reaching the playoffs last year and finishing as the

1

BUFFALO BILLS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **13–4** › OVER | UNDER **11.5**

BEST CASE A Super Bowl victory. The Bills have the coach, the staff, the offensive line, the pass rush, the secondary and, obviously, the quarterback in Josh Allen. They are well built, deep and experienced. There is no safer pick this year with so many powerhouses retooling.

WORST CASE The offense misses coordinator Brian Daboll, now the Giants' coach, more than expected. But that seems unlikely because his replacement, Ken Dorsey, has worked with Allen the past three seasons as QBs coach, and that continuity should keep the offense humming.

2

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **10–7** › OVER | UNDER **8.5**

BEST CASE Division title No. 18 for Belichick. With former offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels now running things in Las Vegas, the Patriots' new committee of coaches taps the unrealized potential of the team's skill players, and Jones still looks like the best QB of the 2021 draft.

WORST CASE The Patriots badly miss McDaniels, who has been calling plays since 2012. Free-agent losses such cornerback J.C. Jackson and guard Ted Karras hurt, while signings such as receiver DeVante Parker and safety Jabril Peppers fail to make an impact.

3

MIAMI DOLPHINS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **8–9** › OVER | UNDER **8.5**

BEST CASE McDaniel cements Tagovailoa as a legitimate NFL starter, something predecessor Brian Flores struggled to do with his revolving door of offensive coordinators. The offense is further boosted by the additions of Hill and tackle Terron Armstead.

WORST CASE Tua struggles, in part because the league has finally learned how to stop the increasingly popular Shanahan-style offense that McDaniel was brought in to deploy. As a result, Miami's surprising firing of Flores after a winning season looks like a big mistake.

4

NEW YORK JETS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **6–11** › OVER | UNDER **5.5**

BEST CASE Fans and management show patience as the Jets win seven games—something the team has done just once in the last six years. GM Joe Douglas, who arrived in June 2019, continues the time-consuming task of rebuilding the team from the ground up.

WORST CASE In a key developmental year for Wilson, the No. 2 pick in the 2021 draft shows only modest improvement, and that leaves Douglas with the thorny question of whether to stick with Wilson for another year or move on and take advantage of a QB-rich draft in '23.

NFL's 15th-rated passer. If Jones improves even marginally, the Patriots—who won 10 games for the 18th time in the last 19 seasons—should at least rack up enough wins to return to the postseason. They are most likely to be a wild-card team again, but they figure to be peskier than they were last year.

At the bottom of the division, the Jets and the Dolphins are pursuing rebuilding plans with strong parallels. Both are headed by coaches plucked from the Kyle Shanahan tree. Miami hired **Mike McDaniel**, Shanahan's longtime run-game mastermind, to be its coach. The Jets meanwhile are in Year 2 with another ex-49ers coach, former defensive coordinator **Robert Saleh**, who brought with him a slew of coaches from that staff, including offensive coordinator **Mike LaFleur**. Both teams are also developing young quarterbacks: **Tua Tagovailoa**, who still is a question mark coming into his third season in Miami, and **Zach Wilson**, who needs to improve after a rough rookie season in New York. Both teams also tried to trade for **Tyreek Hill**, with the Dolphins' compensation package and slightly more competitive roster (and locale?) helping to land the ex-Chief. They are also both likely spectators in the division race for now, though the Dolphins should put up more of a fight in 2022. □

SI SPORTSBOOK

~~OVER~~
UNDER
6.5

Buffalo unleashed Devin Singletary late in 2021, then drafted a capable back in Cook. Allen will dominate, but the RBs will vulture TDs. Bet the under on Allen's rushing touchdowns.

by GARY GRAMLING

SCRIPT FLIPPED

A former doormat takes its place among the elite while a gold-standard franchise looks primed for a plunge

T.J. Watt *Steelers*

ERICK W. RASCO

EVERYONE KNOWS that things change fast in the NFL, but in the AFC North, roles reversed with stunning speed, and the Bengals were the main agents of change. After three consecutive last-place finishes, Cincinnati came within five minutes of a Super Bowl championship in February. Their run was fueled first and foremost by **Joe Burrow**'s superstar sophomore season. He could be even better this year, because this spring the Bengals addressed their biggest weakness, a shaky offensive line, by adding three new starters in free agency: former Cowboys right tackle **La'el Collins**, former Bucs right guard **Alex Cappa** and former Patriots center **Ted Karras**.

But Cincinnati's defense played an oft-overlooked role last year. Coordinator **Lou Anarumo** effectively mixed coverages as the defensive line got it done behind two 2021 free-agent signings: edge rusher **Trey Hendrickson** and run stopper **D.J. Reader**. As long as the defense continues to hold its own, Cincinnati will head back to the postseason.

The presumed top challenger to the Bengals is the Ravens, a team that dealt with an absurd rash of injuries in 2021. Among them: **Lamar Jackson** was inactive for five games with an ankle injury, franchise left tackle **Ronnie Stanley** (also ankle) missed all but the season opener, ball-hawking cornerback **Marcus Peters** and the entire running back depth chart were lost for the season in August, and All-Pro CB **Marlon Humphrey** missed the final month of '21.

Mike Macdonald, a longtime Baltimore assistant who spent last season at Michigan (under John Harbaugh's brother, Jim), returns, now as defensive coordinator. Simply getting Humphrey and Peters back will make a big difference—as should the addition of former Saint **Marcus Williams** at safety. He should solidify a secondary that had a surprising number of coverage busts a year ago. Offensively, Jackson's durability is a lingering question, but the bigger question is whether Baltimore's passing offense will expand, especially after trading wideout Marquise Brown to the Cardinals in April. Baltimore needs **Rashod Bateman**, a 2021 first-round pick, to step up.

1

BALTIMORE RAVENS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE This year health is on the Ravens' side. The defensive backfield rebounds, and Jackson connects with a young receiving group to take the next step as a passer in his fifth season. Baltimore resumes its place among the bluebloods in the top-heavy AFC.

WORST CASE In an uncharacteristic twist, a Ravens defense is less than the sum of its parts, as the secondary is slow to jell. Too often, Baltimore falls behind early. The Ravens must scratch and claw each week simply to stay in the wild-card race.

2

CINCINNATI BENGALS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE Last winter's run was no fluke, as Burrow picks up where he left off and becomes the third Bengals QB (after Boomer Esiason and Ken Anderson) to capture NFL MVP honors. With the defense turning in a stout season, the AFC's road to the Super Bowl runs through Cincinnati.

WORST CASE The wear and tear of last year's 21-game slate shows up in injuries on defense, leading to weekly shootouts. Burrow provides enough firepower to keep Cincinnati alive, but the team must fight for its playoff life in season-ending home dates with Buffalo and Baltimore.

3

CLEVELAND BROWNS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **7–10** › OVER | UNDER **N/A**

BEST CASE Brissett gives the Browns steadier QB play than Baker Mayfield (now a Panther) did a year ago. With the run game thriving behind Nick Chubb, and the defense taking another step up, the Browns stay in AFC North contention as the calendar flips to January.

WORST CASE A few close September losses snowball on a team full of distractions. The front office and coach Kevin Stefanski come under fire as another season unravels. The Browns miss the playoffs. And their high first-round pick in 2023? That belongs to Houston.

4

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **6–11** › OVER | UNDER **7.5**

BEST CASE Unlike 2021, the defense is much more than just the T.J. Watt Show. With the revival on that side of the ball, and Pickett stepping in under center in October and thriving in a point-guard role, it's a revival for the black and gold as they take back the AFC North crown.

WORST CASE The QB play is no better than it was with an aging Roethlisberger—Pickett doesn't show coaches enough to start, while Trubisky flashes ability but is erratic as usual. The run defense remains an issue,and the Steelers squander another year of Watt's prime.

SI SPORTSBOOK

For the first time in nearly two decades, the Steelers will be breaking in a new quarterback, either free agent **Mitchell Trubisky**, signed from Buffalo, or first-round pick **Kenny Pickett** out of Pitt. Finding a successor for Ben Roethlisberger is the biggest question facing this team, but its run defense was stunningly leaky a year ago, a fact overshadowed by **T.J. Watt**'s NFL-record-tying 22½-sack performance. Coach **Mike Tomlin**, new defensive coordinator **Teryl Austin** and new assistant head coach **Brian Flores** need to find a way to steady the front seven.

Of course, the division's biggest offseason change came in Cleveland, where the Browns traded a trove of draft picks to the Texans for—and awarded the largest guaranteed contract in league history to—**Deshaun Watson** despite accounts of sexual harassment and sexual assault against Watson from more than two dozen women in the massage therapy industry. With Watson facing likely suspension, veteran backup **Jacoby Brissett** will lead a run-heavy offense, something he did capably during his lone season starting in Indianapolis in 2019. If the defense's young back seven solidifies behind **Myles Garrett** & Co. up front, this might not be the lost season many expect in Cleveland. □

OVER
~~UNDER~~

1,350.5

Joe Mixon had 334 touches in 2021, finishing with 1,519 scrimmage yards. This year an improved O-line might actually provide some help. Go over on Mixon's rushing plus receiving yards.

SOUTH

by CONOR ORR

CHANGE IS COMING

Tennessee has been the class of the division lately, but it will face tougher competition in 2022

Derrick Henry *Titans*

GEORGE WALKER IV/TENNESSEAN.COM/USA TODAY NETWORK

▸ **FOR THE** past three years the AFC South has been ruled by the duo of **Derrick Henry** and **Mike Vrabel**. The running back has propelled an unstoppable rendition of the outside-zone offense, and the Titans coach has designed a complementary defense while also creating a culture of fearlessness. Vrabel isn't going anywhere anytime soon—he said as much following Tennessee's surprise early ouster from the playoffs last season, when the No. 1 seed fell to the Bengals. But if the division seems more up in the air, it's because Henry's future is.

The 28-year-old missed nine games with a broken bone in his foot last year, and, when he returned for the playoffs, he did not look like the same back he was before the injury. It's possible he simply returned too soon, but it raised the question of whether his massive workload—he led the league in rushing attempts in 2019 and '20 and was 10th last year despite playing a partial season—might finally be catching up with him. The Titans drafted the tough-running **Hassan Haskins** of Michigan in the fourth round to add depth behind Henry. Beyond hoping Henry is his old self, the Titans must find a replacement for top receiver A.J. Brown, whom Tennessee traded to the Eagles. Ideally first-round pick **Treylon Burks** out of Arkansas would acclimate quickly, but he has already had to miss several offseason practices due to asthma.

The Titans also must fend off improved division rivals, most notably in Indianapolis. The Colts ditched sometimes-erratic quarterback Carson Wentz after one season in favor of **Matt Ryan**, the 2016 MVP who spent 14 seasons with the Falcons and became available during that franchise's unsuccessful pursuit of Deshaun Watson. Ryan, 37, is the latest in a cattle call of veteran quarterbacks Indianapolis has turned to since Andrew Luck's stunning retirement before the '19 season. First, it tried Jacoby Brissett. Then Brian Hoyer. Then Philip Rivers. Then Wentz. Last year Ryan threw for his fewest yards since '10, but his supporting cast had slipped, and he could well be invigorated by a fresh start under Colts coach **Frank Reich**, who has earned a reputation as one of

1 INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **12–5** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE Ryan shows he has some life left in his arm, and Taylor earns his second straight All-Pro nod at RB. New defensive coordinator Gus Bradley fills in ably for the departed Matt Eberflus, now the Bears' coach, and the Colts sweep through a vulnerable AFC South.

WORST CASE Ryan shows his age and becomes the third consecutive one-and-done quarterback in Indianapolis. That really hurts because the Colts have a deep roster full of talented players, but once again the signal-caller lets down a team that has Super Bowl upside.

2 TENNESSEE TITANS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **9–8** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE Pushed by the arrival of QB Malik Willis, a third-round pick out of Liberty, Ryan Tannehill has his best season to date. The Titans pick up where they left off in 2021 and, buoyed by a healthy season from Henry, again win the division—and their first playoff game in three years.

WORST CASE The offense struggles mightily, which prompts Tennessee to turn to the talented but raw Willis before he is ready. It seems unlikely that Vrabel would put his back against a wall, but desperate teams have made similarly rash moves since the dawn of football.

3 JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **5–12** › OVER | UNDER **6.5**

BEST CASE Under Pederson, Lawrence shakes off a wobbly rookie year and plays like the generational prospect he was at Clemson. Nothing else really matters in Jacksonville in 2022, although it would be nice if this year's top pick, DE Travon Walker, justifies the Jaguars' choice.

WORST CASE Last year they fired the coach, and this year the Jaguars realize that head of player personnel Trent Baalke needs to go, too, after Walker disappoints and so does WR Christian Kirk, whose signing from Arizona (four years, $72 million) raised plenty of eyebrows.

4 HOUSTON TEXANS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **4–13** › OVER | UNDER **4.5**

BEST CASE The Texans win six to eight games, and Smith is retained as coach. That provides much-needed stability at the top for an organization that in January fired David Culley after one season in which he somehow won four games with a broken roster.

WORST CASE The Texans stick with Mills as losses mount, and it becomes clear this team was assembled with an eye toward Houston's ultimate goals of improved draft position and future salary-cap space. Their season demonstrates why tanking is a blight on the sport.

SI SPORTSBOOK

the best play-callers in the NFL. With Indy, Ryan will have the luxury of working with the best running back in the league, **Jonathan Taylor**.

The Texans and the Jaguars are unlikely to contend this year, but they will at least pose tougher tests than they did in 2021. After last season's disastrous 13-game tenure of Urban Meyer, Jacksonville brought in **Doug Pederson**, who won a Super Bowl with the Eagles in '17 before being fired last January. Pederson's seasoned staff includes **Press Taylor**, the brother of Bengals coach Zac Taylor, who will slide in as the offensive coordinator. Their presence should help '21 top pick **Trevor Lawrence** get back on track from a rookie season in which, saddled with Meyer's unimaginative designs, he threw 12 TDs and 17 interceptions.

OVER ~~UNDER~~

25.5

Wentz had 27 TD passes in Reich's system last season, and bookmakers think Ryan, a superior passer, won't top that in Indy? Bet the over on Ryan's TD throws.

Houston hopes its turnaround will be expedited by a new veteran coach, 64-year-old **Lovie Smith**, and a collection of young players. After having traded away so many picks in previous years, the Texans were able to add more young talent in this year's draft. Third pick **Derek Stingley Jr.** of LSU is a potential star at cornerback, and guard **Kenyon Green**, the 15th pick out of Texas A&M, will bolster a line charged with protecting QB **Davis Mills**, who flashed enough potential in his 11 starts as a rookie to earn a second audition as the long-term starter in Houston. □

by CONOR ORR

ANYONE'S RACE

The Chiefs have owned this division in recent years, but big offseason moves have made it truly up for grabs

Patrick Mahomes *Chiefs*

SIMON BRUTY

▸ **THE NFL'S** division system in effect creates a collection of small economic markets. In the soft NFC East, for example, the level of competition means that it takes relatively little to become a division champion. The AFC West has become the polar opposite. Lately the Chiefs have had their way with this division, capturing the last six titles. But now every other opponent has assembled its own version of a superteam. Perhaps they were spurred on by the realization that Kansas City quarterback **Patrick Mahomes**, who is tied to the franchise through 2031, isn't going anywhere, and they can't simply wait until he's gone.

Last year the Chargers showed they were ready to engage. Behind 24-year-old wunderkind quarterback **Justin Herbert** and 39-year-old rookie head coach **Brandon Staley**, they made a legitimate run at the playoffs, falling short in a 35–32 loss to Las Vegas in the season finale. In the offseason Los Angeles addressed a defense that ranked 23rd in the league, signing two difference-makers in cornerback **J.C. Jackson** from the Patriots and edge rusher **Khalil Mack** from the Bears. Expect Mack and fellow edge rusher **Joey Bosa** to have plenty of meetings with the opposing quarterback.

The Raiders, after making the playoffs for the first time in five seasons, come back this year with new leadership after coach Jon Gruden was fired midway through the season in the wake of the release of old emails with incriminating comments. Las Vegas raided the Patriots, hiring longtime offensive coordinator **Josh McDaniels** as coach and personnel executive **Dave Ziegler** as general manager. On the field the monster addition is **Davante Adams**, brought in from Green Bay in exchange for first- and second-round picks. It was a steep price, but Adams is arguably the best receiver in football—and a former Fresno State teammate of still-improving 31-year-old quarterback **Derek Carr**. On defense Las Vegas added veteran pass rusher **Chandler Jones** from the Cardinals to pair with **Maxx Crosby**, who signed a four-year, $94 million extension this offseason following his second-team All-Pro nod in 2021.

1

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **10.5**

BEST CASE The Chiefs don't miss Hill one bit, which makes them feel great about the five picks they got in the deal. Former Steeler JuJu Smith-Schuster performs nicely in Hill's place, while first-round picks CB Trent McDuffie and DE George Karlaftis enliven an already stout defense.

WORST CASE The Chiefs miss Hill in a way that suggests coach Andy Reid's schemes need rare talent to work. Kansas City comes out of this season feeling the need to rebuild after seeing the team is too dependent on aging stars such as TE Travis Kelce (32) and DE Frank Clark (29).

2

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **10.5**

BEST CASE Herbert continues his rise, and their talented but aging receiving corps stays healthy. New personnel help Staley run the defense he envisions for Los Angeles, and not the version that buckled with a playoff berth on the line against the Raiders in Week 18.

WORST CASE Defensive additions fizzle as Jackson's big year for the Patriots in 2021 looks like an outlier, and Mack, 31, is too old to make a difference. That is a problem both now and down the road, because the Chargers sacrificed draft capital and cap space to bring in those players.

3

DENVER BRONCOS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **10–7** › OVER | UNDER **10.5**

BEST CASE Wilson leads the way as the Broncos' offense goes from 23rd in scoring last year to top 10 in the NFL. With defensive backs Patrick Surtain II, Ronald Darby and Justin Simmons all healthy and playing full seasons, Denver also has a top-five defense.

WORST CASE It turns out Wilson's struggles in 2021 were less about Seattle's scheme and more about his limitations. Denver's big acquisition on defense, ex-Cowboy edge rusher Randy Gregory (five years, $70 million), proves to be another misplaced bet.

4

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **9–8** › OVER | UNDER **8.5**

BEST CASE Thanks to new coach McDaniels and new target Adams, Carr throws for even more yards than last year while improving his TD-to-INT ratio (23–14 in 2021). Jones, as designed, pairs with Crosby to create a rush that flusters the division's other quarterbacks.

WORST CASE McDaniels is, like every other Patriots assistant save for Bill O'Brien, unable to find his niche outside of the structure of the New England dynasty. Carr is fine compared to the rest of the NFL, but still looks like the fourth-best quarterback in this division.

SI SPORTSBOOK

But the most seismic moves were made in Denver. The team replaced defensive-minded head coach Vic Fangio with **Nathaniel Hackett**, 42, a widely admired offensive mind who spent the past three seasons as the offensive coordinator of the Packers. While Hackett certainly benefited from working with Aaron Rodgers in Green Bay, he has had success in a variety of situations. In Jacksonville he helped Blake Bortles lead that team to the AFC championship game in 2017. At Syracuse, he produced the school's first quarterback draft pick (Ryan Nassib in '14) since Donovan McNabb in 1999. In Denver, Hackett will work with **Russell Wilson**, who won a Super Bowl eight years ago in Seattle and may or may not have forced his way out of town after growing stale in the ball-control offense of coach Pete Carroll.

Wilson is the real game-changer. If Hackett can rejuvenate the nine-time Pro Bowl QB—who last year endured his first career losing season—that will give Mahomes his greatest and most immediate foil and complete a revamping of the AFC West in which every team now has a fighting shot. And when you factor in that Mahomes will be lining up for the first time in his career without his favorite deep target, three-time All-Pro Tyreek Hill, who was traded to Miami, consider this market officially disrupted. □

OVER
~~UNDER~~

4,100.5

Wilson topped 4,100 passing yards in two of his last three seasons, and new coach Hackett helped run the Packers' attack. Go over on Wilson's yards.

FANTASY

SI Fantasy expert Michael Fabiano projects his Top 25 NFL fantasy players this season. For the full Top 200 list and updated rankings, go to ***SI.com/fantasy***

1	**JONATHAN TAYLOR**	RB	IND
2	**CHRISTIAN McCAFFREY**	RB	CAR
3	**DERRICK HENRY**	RB	TEN
4	**AUSTIN EKELER**	RB	LAC
5	**COOPER KUPP**	WR	LAR
6	**NAJEE HARRIS**	RB	PIT
7	**JUSTIN JEFFERSON**	WR	MIN
8	**JA'MARR CHASE**	WR	CIN
9	**DALVIN COOK**	RB	MIN
10	**JOE MIXON**	RB	CIN
11	**DAVANTE ADAMS**	WR	LV
12	**D'ANDRE SWIFT**	RB	DET
13	**CEEDEE LAMB**	WR	DAL
14	**STEFON DIGGS**	WR	BUF
15	**DEEBO SAMUEL**	WR	SF
16	**MIKE EVANS**	WR	TB
17	**LEONARD FOURNETTE**	RB	TB
18	**TRAVIS KELCE**	TE	KC
19	**TYREEK HILL**	WR	MIA
20	**AARON JONES**	RB	GB
21	**MARK ANDREWS**	TE	BAL
22	**NICK CHUBB**	RB	CLE
23	**SAQUON BARKLEY**	RB	NYG
24	**KEENAN ALLEN**	WR	LAC
25	**ALVIN KAMARA**	RB	NO

RICH BARNES/USA TODAY SPORTS (TAYLOR); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (HERBERT, KUPP)

SI SPORTSBOOK

SMART MONEY

You want stat leaders? Here's how the races in three key categories look by the odds at SI Sportsbook. For a full slate of NFL player props, go to **SISPORTSBOOK.COM**

PASSING YARDS

Justin Herbert	+700
Tom Brady	+750
Joe Burrow	+800
Patrick Mahomes	+800
Matthew Stafford	+850

RUSHING YARDS

Jonathan Taylor	+500
Derrick Henry	+500
Nick Chubb	+800
Dalvin Cook	+800
Najee Harris	+1200
Joe Mixon	+1200

RECEIVING YARDS

Cooper Kupp	+750
Justin Jefferson	+800
Davante Adams	+1200
Ja'Marr Chase	+1200
Travis Kelce	+1200

by GARY GRAMLING

ARMS RAISED?

The division hinges on the ability of its quarterbacks to find a new level—or, in one case, get back to his old one

Jalen Hurts *Eagles*

ERICK W. RASCO

▸ **IT'S BEEN** four seasons since an NFC East team won a postseason game—and that was the Eagles' "double-doink" game in Chicago. But that streak will likely be broken this year in a wide-open NFC. This division now boasts two teams with legitimate Super Bowl aspirations and two others who profile as sneaky wild-card contenders.

The Cowboys, who won the division last year, are favorites to repeat because of their talent on both sides of the ball. Their turnaround last season, from 6–10 to 12–5, was due to the return of quarterback **Dak Prescott**, who missed 11 games in 2020, but the young defense that took off under first-year coordinator **Dan Quinn** was just as impactful. The former Falcons head coach, who also coordinated Seattle's Legion of Boom defense, had Dallas playing fast and causing chaos, with an NFL-best 34 takeaways last year. The key is the pass rush, spearheaded by Defensive Player of the Year candidate **Micah Parsons** (13 sacks as a rookie in '21), which created opportunities for the secondary, led by third-year cornerback **Trevon Diggs** (11 interceptions in '21, the most by any NFL player in 40 seasons).

Of course, a deep playoff run will require better postseason play from Prescott. His team led the NFL in scoring with 31.2 points per game, but he dealt with a series of ailments in 2021 and struggled down the stretch, including a poor performance in the Cowboys' 23–17 home wild-card loss to the 49ers. Prescott is now just 1–3 in playoff games, and that record will be a popular talking point come January.

The Eagles were a surprise playoff team last season, with a diverse running game built around first-year starter **Jalen Hurts** at quarterback. It's unclear whether Philly's front office views Hurts as its QB of the future or a stopgap until the next guy (the Eagles own two first-round picks, including the Saints', in what could be a QB-rich 2023 draft). But with the acquisition of **A.J. Brown**, arguably one of the NFL's five best receivers, from Tennessee, Hurts is now surrounded by talent, and this season will give a defining read on his long-range potential.

1

DALLAS COWBOYS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **10.5**

BEST CASE Prescott finds another gear late in the season, and CeeDee Lamb establishes himself as a superstar at wide receiver in his third year, now that Amari Cooper has gone to Cleveland. Dallas makes a run to the Super Bowl for the first time since the Troy Aikman era.

WORST CASE The long season proves to be too much for a once-dominant-but-now-aging offensive line, and a banged-up team limps into the playoffs as a wild-card entrant after a December swoon. Prescott shrinks in January again, and Mike McCarthy is out as coach.

2

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **10–7** › OVER | UNDER **8.5**

BEST CASE The passing game expands behind the Hurts-to-Brown connection, but it's the infusion of speed on defense—thanks to new edge rusher Haason Reddick and rookie linebacker Nakobe Dean—that launches the Eagles past Dallas for the division crown.

WORST CASE The Eagles get their answer on Hurts; he remains effective with his legs but inconsistent with his arm. The reinforced defense still gets diced up by quality QBs as it did last year. Philly misses the playoffs and heads into the offseason looking for a new quarterback.

3

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **7–10** › OVER | UNDER **7.5**

BEST CASE The defense is the sum of its impressive parts, with the line wreaking havoc and Young back at full strength. The Commanders are at their best in the December slop, with Wentz avoiding big mistakes as the team rides a low-scoring winning streak to a wild-card berth.

WORST CASE The defense's back seven doesn't hold up its end of the bargain. An offensive line weakened by the losses in free agency of Brandon Scherff and Ereck Flowers leaves Wentz under fire and making the kind of bad decisions that wore out his welcome in previous stops.

4

NEW YORK GIANTS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **6–11** › OVER | UNDER **7.5**

BEST CASE The offense is revived as Daboll emphasizes Jones's blend of pocket presence and athleticism; Barkley tops 1,500 yards as a rusher and receiver; and WR Kenny Golladay plays up to his four-year, $72 million contract. Big Blue plays meaningful January football.

WORST CASE A young defense doesn't deliver in new defensive coordinator Wink Martindale's complex system. As for the offense, it's back to the drawing board: Jones fails to take off and the Giants—picking in the top five again—look for yet another QB of the future.

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Washington has a new name (Commanders) and a new quarterback (**Carson Wentz**, acquired from Indianapolis) but still figures to play the same brand of football it has the past two seasons (ugly). It starts four first-round picks on the defensive line, but unfortunately the best of the bunch, DE **Chase Young**, is coming back from a torn ACL in November and is a question mark heading into the season. Of course, the biggest question mark is Wentz, who was an MVP candidate in 2017 with the Eagles but has now had franchises give up on him in back-to-back years. This could be the last chance for the 29-year-old to show he can lead a team.

OVER
~~UNDER~~
1,175
With Cooper and Cedrick Wilson moving on, there are at least 150 targets up for grabs in Dallas. Lamb had 1,102 yards in 2021. Smash the over on his receiving yards.

After another disappointing season, the Giants went upstate to find new leadership. They hired Buffalo offensive coordinator **Brian Daboll** as their new coach and Bills assistant general manager **Joe Schoen** as their new GM. This looks like a transition year for Big Blue. But any hope New York has of succeeding in 2022 rides on whether Daboll can unlock the potential of fourth-year quarterback **Daniel Jones** as he did with Josh Allen in Buffalo, and also whether he can make better use of talented but oft-injured running back **Saquon Barkley**, who has missed 18 games after putting up consecutive 1,000-yard seasons his first two years in the league. □

by GARY GRAMLING

GREENEST PASTURES

Despite a key loss, the Packers are still the strong favorite in a division otherwise stocked with teams in transition

Jaire Alexander *Packers*

RIGHT AROUND the time **Aaron Rodgers** ended an offseason of uncertainty and arrived at Packers headquarters for training camp in July 2021—donning his favorite *The Office* T-shirt—and certainly after he signed a four-year contract extension after the season, it seemed the NFC North would belong to the Packers for the foreseeable future. The loss of All-Pro receiver **Davante Adams** to the Raiders, great as he is, does nothing to change that.

Rodgers on his own is enough to make Green Bay the heavyweight of the division. He has won consecutive MVPs while mastering coach **Matt LaFleur**'s scheme. And during Rodgers's three seasons under LaFleur, the Packers played seven games without Adams and won them all, averaging 31.6 points. Their system makes it easier to break in new receivers, which they will have to do with Marquez Valdes-Scantling also gone (he signed with the Chiefs). The returning pass catchers include receivers **Allen Lazard** and **Randall Cobb** and tight end **Robert Tonyan** (due back from an ACL tear). Still, Green Bay will need its new wideouts, veteran **Sammy Watkins** and second-round pick **Christian Watson** of North Dakota State, to get up to speed quickly.

But it helps that Rodgers is now paired with a strong defense. The unit ranked ninth in the NFL despite injuries in the secondary last year, including a shoulder strain that limited star cornerback **Jaire Alexander** to four games. With the continued emergence of edge rusher **Rashan Gary** and late-blooming linebacker **De'Vondre Campbell**, the Packers could have the best defense in football this year.

Green Bay also has margin for error in a retooling division. The Lions, despite coming off a three-win season, look relatively solid. **Dan Campbell**'s rebuilding squad fought hard and played its best football in late 2021. The draft's No. 2 pick, **Aidan Hutchinson** out of Michigan, will galvanize the pass rush, and you shouldn't sleep on the offense. The line is quietly effective, and QB **Jared Goff** should be more comfortable during his second season in Detroit. Last year rookie receiver **Amon-Ra St. Brown** was a revelation, and the corps

QUINN HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES

1

GREEN BAY PACKERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **11.5**

BEST CASE Rodgers shows no signs of slowing down at age 38, winning a third straight MVP award. Complemented by a dominant defense, the Packers get it done in the postseason, too, with Rodgers lifting the Lombardi Trophy for the first time in 11 years.

WORST CASE New receivers struggle in Green Bay, leaving Rodgers frustrated. The defense, meanwhile, is hit by injuries once again. The Packers limp into the postseason as NFC North champs but lose a playoff game in Lambeau Field for the third straight year.

2

DETROIT LIONS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **9–8** › OVER | UNDER **6.5**

BEST CASE Goff looks reborn as the Lions shred defenses with their array of offensive weapons. While the defense is still a work in progress, it is opportunistic enough to create 25 takeaways, up from 19 last year. The franchise earns its first playoff berth since 2016.

WORST CASE The offense merely treads water while the young defense too often breaks. After early stumbles the team loses some of its fighting spirit and realizes it needs a new quarterback to truly thrive. Campbell keeps his job but enters 2023 in the hottest of seats.

3

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **7–10** › OVER | UNDER **8.5**

BEST CASE The Sean McVay coaching tree does it again as O'Connell coaxes a stunning season out of QB Kirk Cousins, while Jefferson wins Offensive Player of the Year honors. Thanks to a smoke-and-mirrors defense, the Vikings get to 10 wins and the playoffs.

WORST CASE Cousins is no Matthew Stafford, and it shows as O'Connell's offense remains middling. Meanwhile, a secondary that's one part too old and one part too young struggles, particularly without Zimmer there to coach it up. Minnesota finishes 2022 thinking "rebuild."

4

CHICAGO BEARS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **3–14** › OVER | UNDER **6.5**

BEST CASE It's a coach's league, and Eberflus and Getsy get the most out of their respective units. The scrappy Bears are a tough out every week, with Fields showing signs that he is a franchise QB. The Bears finish below .500, but optimism is high going into 2023.

WORST CASE There is simply not enough talent on the roster to win games. But, even worse, Fields's development remains stuck in the Soldier Field mud playing behind an offensive line that can't protect him and a group of receivers that can't get open.

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added speedy **Jameson Williams**, a first-round pick out of Alabama, and 6' 4" veteran **D.J. Chark**, signed from the Jaguars.

The Vikings will, for the first time since 2013, be coached by someone besides Mike Zimmer. **Kevin O'Connell**, most recently a Rams assistant, will build an attack around wide receiver **Justin Jefferson** and running back **Dalvin Cook**. The bigger question is whether new defensive coordinator **Ed Donatell** can fix a surprisingly leaky pass defense, one that hopes to get a pass-rush boost with the return of end **Danielle Hunter** from a torn pectoral muscle and the arrival of former Packers linebacker **Za'Darius Smith**.

In Chicago, **Matt Eberflus**, known for his overachieving defenses in Indianapolis, will try to bring about a Monsters of the Midway revival as the Bears' new coach. Though he'll have to do it without Khalil Mack (traded to the Chargers) and with two second-round rookies—cornerback **Kyler Gordon** and safety **Jaquan Brisker**—likely to start in the secondary. Meanwhile, second-year quarterback **Justin Fields** will work with former Packers QBs coach **Luke Getsy** as his new offensive coordinator. But it won't help that the O-line is full of question marks and the supporting cast is short on weapons beyond rising star wide receiver **Darnell Mooney**. □

OVER
~~UNDER~~
7.5

Adam Thielen has caught double-digit touchdowns in each of the past two seasons. Cousins's favorite red zone threat in Minnesota should remain that; bet over on Thielen's TD receptions.

by GARY GRAMLING

STILL THE ONE

The GOAT continues to stand tall in Tampa while the rest of the division scrambles for a semblance of order

Tom Brady *Buccaneers*

ERICK W. RASCO

▸ **NO DIVISION** in football has undergone more upheaval than the NFC South, where every team will enter the 2022 season with either a new coach or a new projected starting quarterback. The team with the greatest claim to stability is the one whose coach and Hall of Fame tight end retired—and whose quarterback retired, too, only to reverse course after 40 days.

The Bucs' change at the top should not be that radical, because **Todd Bowles** had been Tampa Bay's defensive coordinator for three seasons before he was promoted to replace head coach Bruce Arians. And Arians, who announced his surprise retirement March 30, will still be around the team in a front-office role.

And **Tom Brady**, 45, is the ultimate stabilizer. Any hand-wringing over his age seems foolish given his continued level of excellence; last year he threw for a career-high 5,316 yards. But it is fair to wonder whether he will be affected by the retirement of Rob Gronkowski and also the questionable status of receiver **Chris Godwin**, who tore his ACL last December and is hoping to be back for Week 1. The NFL's fifth-best scoring defense returns largely intact, with the only change of note being that veteran free agent **Akiem Hicks** replaces Ndamukong Suh at tackle.

New Orleans will be led by someone other than Sean Payton for the first time in 15 seasons, but the team is not simply tearing down and starting over under new coach **Dennis Allen**, promoted from defensive coordinator. When they lost veteran safeties Marcus Williams (to free agency) and Malcolm Jenkins (to retirement), the Saints went out and added replacements in **Tyrann Mathieu** and **Marcus Maye**. The defense, the team's strength, is still loaded with veteran talent, including two 30-something All-Pros, linebacker **Demario Davis** and edge rusher **Cam Jordan**. On offense New Orleans replaced another free-agent loss, tackle Terron Armstead, by trading for a second first-round pick and grabbing **Trevor Penning** of Northern Iowa. While the receiving should be strong, with a healthy **Michael Thomas** being joined by **Chris Olave**, the speedy 11th pick from Ohio State, and new slot man **Jarvis Landry**,

1

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **13–4** › OVER | UNDER **11.5**

BEST CASE The defense carries the team early as the offense finds its footing with a new slot receiver (former Falcon Russell Gage) and tight end (rookie Cade Otton), and Brady has all the parts working by the time the playoffs arrive. The quarterback makes his 10th Super Bowl start.

WORST CASE Anything short of a Super Bowl victory is a disappointment for a Brady-led team, which is why a second straight divisional-round loss doesn't go over well. Brady's second free-agency tour (Miami? San Francisco?) unofficially starts in January.

2

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **9–8** › OVER | UNDER **7.5**

BEST CASE The defense is spectacular all year and delivers two more dominant performances against Brady's Bucs (Allen is 4–1 against them). Thomas returns to All-Pro form, helping Winston and the offense, and the Saints have a wild-card spot wrapped up by Week 17.

WORST CASE Payton's absence looms as large as Drew Brees's did last year (and continues to do so). Winston forces throws into coverage and deals out interceptions in bunches. Their defense's stellar season is wasted, and the Saints decide to tear it all down heading into 2023.

3

CAROLINA PANTHERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **5–12** › OVER | UNDER **5.5**

BEST CASE Carolina starts 3–0 for a second straight year, but this time it sustains that success. The young defense takes the next step, but the big story is the odd couple of Mayfield and McAdoo; the QB and coordinator revive their careers as the Panthers clinch a wild-card spot.

WORST CASE Mayfield, like Teddy Bridgewater and Sam Darnold before him, proves he's not the long-term answer in Carolina. And the next Panthers quarterback will be selected by a different coach and general manager as owner David Tepper cleans house after the season.

4

ATLANTA FALCONS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **3–14** › OVER | UNDER **4.5**

BEST CASE They don't have the right pieces, but the Falcons do have a roster that competes and steals a half dozen wins. WR Drake London is the Offensive Rookie of the Year, while Ridder starts and impresses in three late-season victories, earning the No. 1 job heading into 2023.

WORST CASE The Falcons are winless heading into December and at risk of becoming the first 0–17 team in NFL history. Their first victory, in a home game against the Steelers, comes in a near-empty stadium; the fan base seems more invested in Ryan's run in Indy.

quarterback is a question. **Jameis Winston** tore his ACL in October; backing him up is recent Bears discard **Andy Dalton**.

The Panthers should have a new starting QB after acquiring **Baker Mayfield** from the Browns on July 6. Even though Cleveland chose to move on from the top pick of the 2018 draft, Mayfield is just two seasons removed from a career year with the Browns, and he'll have plenty to work with in receivers **D.J. Moore** and **Robby Anderson**, as well as **Christian McCaffrey** as a pass-catching force out of the backfield. It will be up to Carolina's new offensive coordinator, former Giants head coach **Ben McAdoo**, to get the parts working.

OVER
~~UNDER~~
35.5
Brady had 40-plus TD passes in each of his first two seasons in Tampa. He didn't unretire just to limp to the finish line; bet the over on the GOAT's TD passes.

The Falcons seem to be setting up shop in the division's basement, especially after a humiliating divorce from 14-season starter Matt Ryan following the team's failure to acquire Deshaun Watson. So **Marcus Mariota**, who had been a Raiders backup the last two seasons, reunites with coach **Arthur Smith**, his former offensive coordinator in Tennessee. If Mariota falters, Smith could bench him (as he eventually did with the Titans) for third-round rookie **Desmond Ridder** of Cincinnati. The good news in otherwise-bleak Atlanta is that 21-year-old tight end **Kyle Pitts** and 23-year-old cornerback **A.J. Terrell** have a chance to be perennial All-Pros. □

by GARY GRAMLING

CALI CLASH

The defending Super Bowl champion's biggest challenge will come from its old nemesis up north

Cooper Kupp *Rams*

THE CAULDRON of competition that is the NFC West produced the Super Bowl winner last season, and, at least from an internal perspective, the Rams' biggest obstacle to repeating may be their age, given that their best players on both sides of the ball (quarterback **Matthew Stafford**, 34, and defensive lineman **Aaron Donald**, 32) are on the wrong side of 30.

But Los Angeles, as it has shown, is resilient as well as talented. Last year the Rams withstood a devastating midseason injury to receiver Robert Woods and the mid–Super Bowl loss of his replacement, Odell Beckham Jr. They had to wrangle safety Eric Weddle out of retirement for the playoffs. But led by coach **Sean McVay**, they made it work.

This offseason, L.A. brought in some fresh, if not necessarily young, reinforcements. It poached **Bobby Wagner**, 32, a six-time All-Pro at linebacker, from the Seahawks, and signed former Bears wide receiver **Allen Robinson**, a 29-year-old contested-catch specialist who could thrive with Stafford, as Kenny Golladay did in Detroit. With **Cooper Kupp** frequently drawing double coverage, Robinson could feast now that he's a complementary receiver for the first time in his career.

The Rams' biggest external obstacle is the 49ers, who had beaten them six straight times until L.A. won the NFC title game, 20–17. San Francisco was once again Super Bowl–caliber on the defensive side of the ball last year, with coordinator **DeMeco Ryans** blitzing aggressively. This year's addition of former Chiefs cover artist **Charvarius Ward** should solidify the cornerback group, a must given Ryans's approach. On offense the Niners' unique rushing attack, keyed by all-world left tackle **Trent Williams**, and a bevy of catch-and-run receivers, should have **Kyle Shanahan**'s scheme humming—but the wild card is the quarterback. This should be the season the coach hands the keys to **Trey Lance**, whose big arm and mobility are prototypical for the modern NFL, and the reason that the Niners traded up to take him third in the 2021 draft. But is Shanahan ready to put his trust—and his realistic Super Bowl hopes—in the hands of the

SIMON BRUTY

1

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **12–5** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE All the hand-wringing over Lance's inexperience seems silly in retrospect. His ability to stress defenses downfield and his threat to run open up new possibilities for the offense. With a defense that's more than stout enough, the 49ers make it to the Super Bowl.

WORST CASE Lance struggles at times, and Shanahan decides he can't afford to be patient, putting his young prodigy back on the bench. Shanahan's system creates enough offense to get back to the postseason, but the Niners can't score points like the other NFC bluebloods.

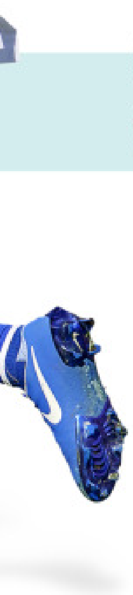
2

LOS ANGELES RAMS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **11–6** › OVER | UNDER **10.5**

BEST CASE Things pick up right where they left off—except the Rams are healthier across the board and stay that way in 2022. Kupp and Robinson each top 1,000 yards and 10 TDs, Donald is still Donald and the Rams throw another February parade in Los Angeles.

WORST CASE They call it a Super Bowl hangover, but it's more a combination of age, injuries and signs of burnout on the coaching staff. The Rams turn it on just enough in December to sneak into the playoffs as a wild card but go out with a one-and-done whimper.



3

ARIZONA CARDINALS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **9–8** › OVER | UNDER **9.5**

BEST CASE Kliff Kingsbury updates his offense with some Shanahan-like concepts, helping Kyler Murray catch opponents off guard early. Hopkins's midseason return gives the team another shot in the arm, as the Cards finally finish strong en route to a surprise division title.

WORST CASE The Air Raid offense looks stale, especially with a dearth of quality receivers. The defense is unremarkable without Jones. Murray unfollows the team's social media accounts, and the former baseball prospect spends January thinking about Oakland A's spring training.

4

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

PROJECTED 2022 RECORD **3–14** › OVER | UNDER **5.5**

BEST CASE Carroll built this program around competition, and the Seahawks take on a scrappy personality as they did in his early years in Seattle. There's no postseason berth, but they avoid 10 losses and the franchise is reinvigorated heading into 2023.

WORST CASE The overmatched Seahawks don't just lose often; they lose ugly. The Island of Misfit Toys that makes up the defensive roster allows the most points in the NFL. Carroll, after 12 seasons in Seattle, won't be back to decide on the No. 1 pick in the 2023 draft.

SI SPORTSBOOK

22-year-old after making it to the NFC title game last year with a competent but unspectacular veteran in **Jimmy Garoppolo**?

The Cardinals, despite making the playoffs last season, seem shaky. Arizona flew out to a 7–0 start in 2021 but was playing with an efficiency that it couldn't sustain. After a 4–6 finish, it looked overmatched in a 34–11 wild-card loss to the Rams. In an offense that uses the most four-receiver sets in the NFL, it's a particular problem that All-Pro **DeAndre Hopkins** will be serving a six-game suspension for performance-enhancing drugs, while Christian Kirk left for Jacksonville, with **Marquise Brown** the only notable addition to the receiving corps. And how will a defense that lost its most important player, edge rusher Chandler Jones, to free agency recapture its early-season dominance?

For almost a decade, the Seahawks could bank on the trio of coach **Pete Carroll**, quarterback Russell Wilson and Bobby Wagner to keep them in contention. Now only 71-year-old Carroll remains. Underwhelming veterans **Geno Smith** and **Drew Lock** will compete to replace Wilson under center, while on defense, Seattle will be lining up a number of unproven and mismatched parts where the Legion of Boom crews smothered opponents. Especially in this division, the going for the Seahawks will be awfully tough. □

OVER
~~**UNDER**~~
9.5

The Cardinals' James Conner had 15 rushing TDs in 2021, and now Chase Edmonds is gone to Miami. Conner has an easy pathway to goal line carries; go with the over on his rushing TDs.

▸ *Flip for COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW*

▸ *Flip for NFL PREVIEW*

Football Preview

SEPTEMBER 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 8
SI.COM | @SINOW
Photograph by KEVIN D. LILES

Sports Illustrated

2 0
CFB
2 2

STET

by
PAT FORDE

STETSON
BENNETT ▸
Is a Georgia Hero.
Now He's Back to
Double Down on
That National Title

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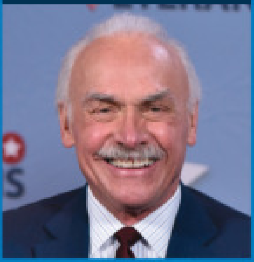
SALUTE TO VETERANS

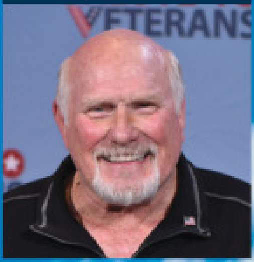
★ Rocky Bleier ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

U.S.ARMY

★ Terry Bradshaw ★



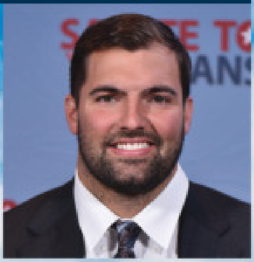
TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

★ Greg Gadson ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion with New York

U.S.ARMY

★ Alejandro Villanueva ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore

U.S.ARMY

★ Joe Cardona ★

U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England

U.S. NAVY

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LINEUP

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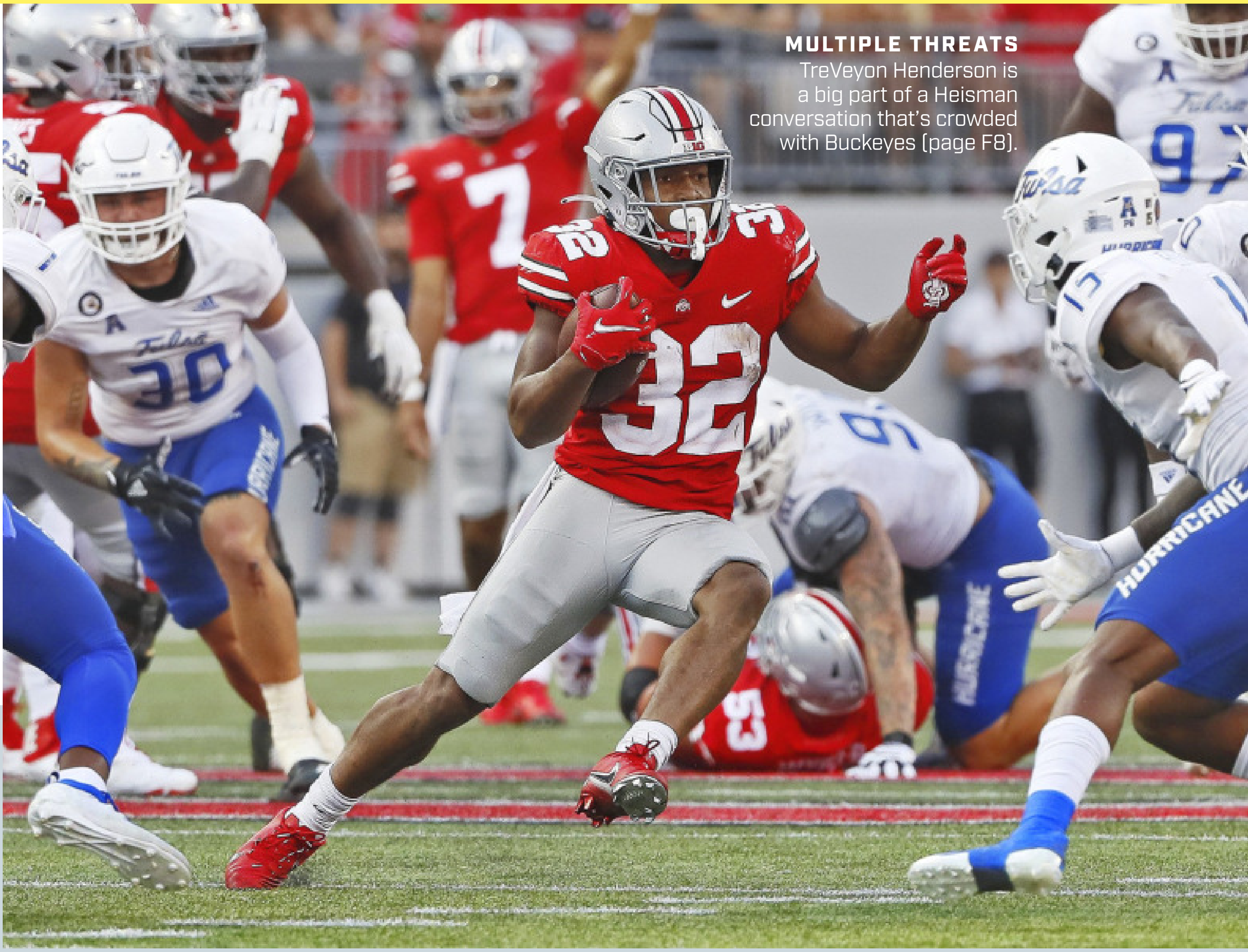
20 CFB 22

PREVIEW



MULTIPLE THREATS
TreVeyon Henderson is a big part of a Heisman conversation that's crowded with Buckeyes (page F8).

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/
USA TODAY NETWORK

F2

THE EVOLUTION IS TELEVISED
As traditional conferences and rivalries are upended, a sport seeks a new identity
BY PAT FORDE

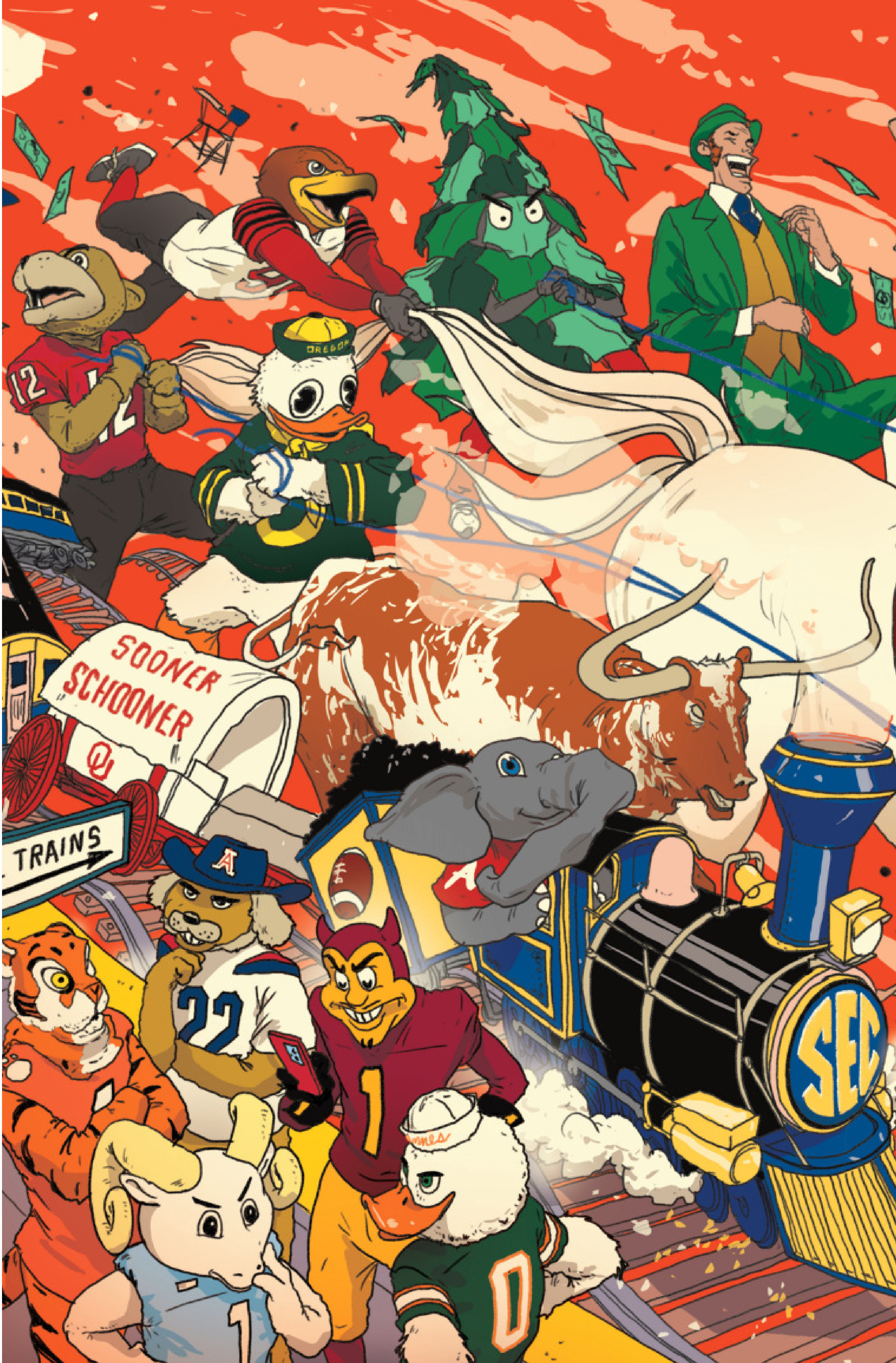
THE TOP 25

SI's preseason ranking of the country's best—and most interesting—teams, with in-depth looks including but not limited to:

- No. 1 Alabama and Nick Saban's Next Act **BY RICHARD JOHNSON** P. F6
- No. 3 Georgia and Why Stetson Bennett Is Back **BY PAT FORDE** P. F10
- No. 8 Texas A&M and the Power of NIL **BY ROSS DELLENGER** P. F20
- No. 15 Miami and the Return of Mario Cristobal **BY ROSS DELLENGER** P. F30
- No. 23 UCLA and the Pain of Title Droughts **BY DANIELA PEREZ** P. F40

NFL

FLIP FOR THE
NFL PREVIEW



OREGON
12
SOONER
SCHOONER
OU
TRAINS
A
22
1
SEC
0

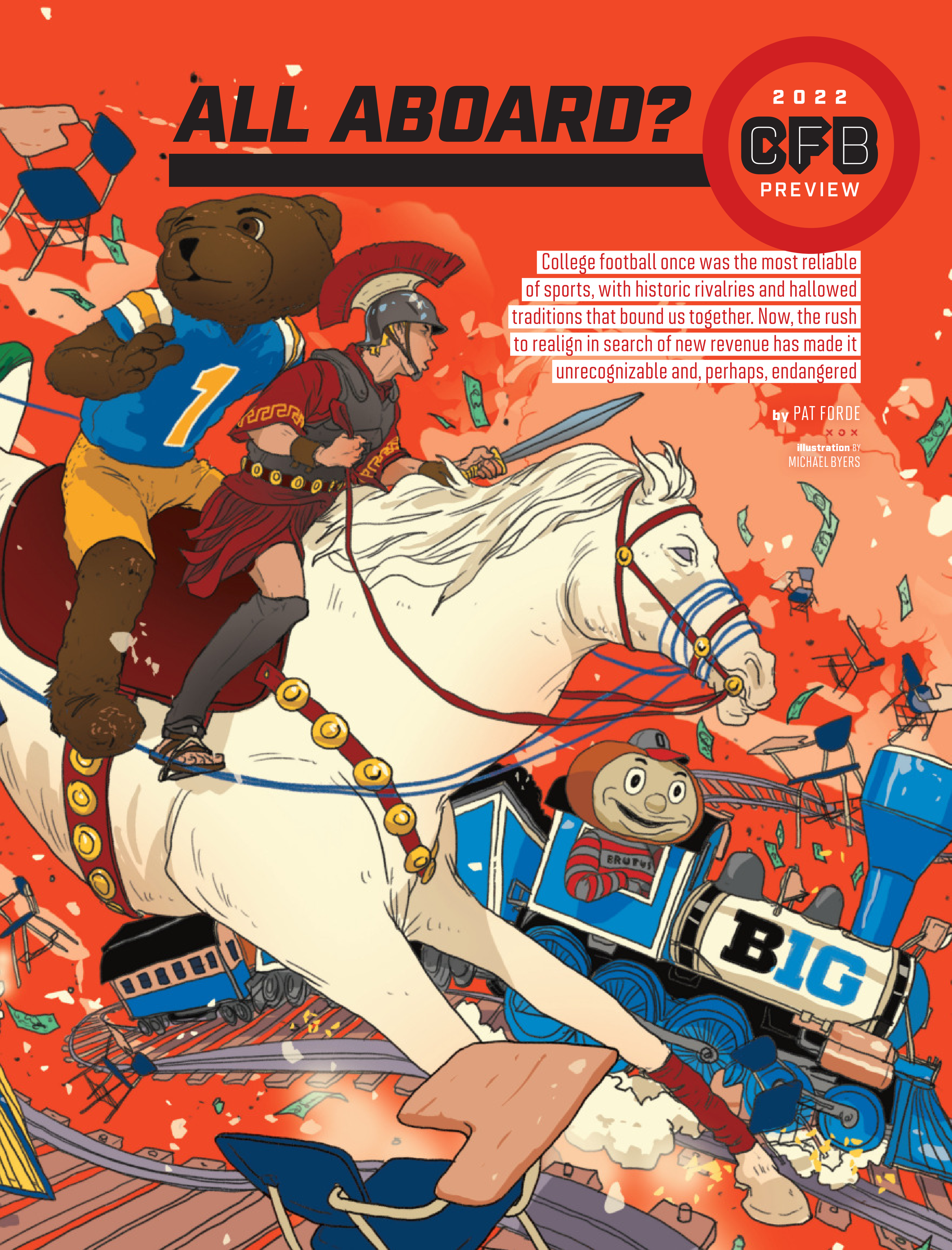
ALL ABOARD?

2022
CFB
PREVIEW

College football once was the most reliable of sports, with historic rivalries and hallowed traditions that bound us together. Now, the rush to realign in search of new revenue has made it unrecognizable and, perhaps, endangered

by PAT FORDE

illustration BY MICHAEL BYERS



CFB

PREVIEW

THE NEW MATH

Pac-12 stalwarts UCLA and USC will give the Big Ten 16 teams in 2024.

KEITH BIRMINGHAM/MEDIANEWS GROUP/PASADENA STAR-NEWS/GETTY IMAGES

USC FIRST PLAYED Stanford in football in 1905. Its initial game against California was seven years later. The Cardinal and the Golden Bears, not crosstown UCLA, have played the Trojans the most—101 and 110 times, respectively. Those rivalries are now presumed dead.

Also killed over the course of successive, percussive summers: the national flavor of college athletics; geographic sense; long-standing traditions; prioritizing academics and athlete welfare; and any semblance of a broad-based balance of power. We have entered the Power Two era, the Southeastern Conference and the Big Ten, behemoth leagues stockpiling schools and leaving three pseudo-peer conferences scrambling. What the SEC began in 2021 by acquiring Texas and Oklahoma from the Big 12, the Big Ten accelerated in late June by grabbing USC and UCLA—the entire Los Angeles market—from the Pac-12.

The erosion of college football's identity is quickening, where the only fundamental differences between it and the NFL are the athletes' ages and pay, and the primary day of the week on which they play. And no, this erosion has little to do with name, image and likeness compensation for players *(page F20)*—that was overdue and amounts to pennies on the dollar compared with the nine-figure repercussions of realignment.

College athletics, so often piously touted as a builder of character in young people, currently possesses the same charm as the Colts slinking out of Baltimore in the dead of the night for Indianapolis. In the absence of strong leadership at any level, it is being manipulated by warring TV networks that have chosen sides (ESPN with the SEC, Fox with the Big Ten). Negotiations between schools and conferences are held in hypersecrecy, with duplicity and disinformation shrugged off as the price of doing business. The five crime families in *The Godfather* trusted each other more than the Power 5 conferences do.

In 30 years of cyclical realignment, the Pac-12's gutting feels most like a bedrock betrayal. The decisions of USC and UCLA are justifiable in an economic vacuum; the revenue gained by moving to the Big Ten is massive, and money now drives every decision in college sports. But what will be lost is of significant value, too.

This is the first time the centerpieces of a long-established league simply up and left. Yes, Oklahoma and Texas were the tentpoles of the Big 12, but that conference had been dysfunctional since its inception, in 1996, when it was cobbled together with pieces of the Big Eight and the Southwest Conference. By contrast, the first iteration of the Pac-12 was formed in 1915.

Its eight core members (USC, UCLA, Stanford, Cal, Oregon, Oregon State, Washington and Washington State) have been in the league since the ’20s. They stood the test of time. Together.

The conference became a national leader in integration and women’s sports, while winning hundreds of NCAA titles. UCLA men’s basketball set the standard for dominance. USC football was a top-five program for decades. And the entire league was suffused with a West Coast cool that the advent of television—particularly in color—beamed across the nation. Cold hearts in the Midwest and Northeast melted at the sight of sunny Thanksgiving-weekend games in the L.A. Coliseum; splendor on the natural grass, with the USC Song Girls, marching band and white horse adding to the aura. No clouds of frozen breath to be found.

USC and UCLA will still play visually appealing home games in the Big Ten, but they might kick off at 9 a.m. Pacific. They’ll also play winter-condition road games in Iowa City and East Lansing, Mich., and State College, Pa., a kind of reverse recruiting inducement for players from talent-rich Southern California. Take the money; leave the enthusiasm.

Those schools jumping at the payday have to sell their fans on rooting for revenue. That doesn’t come naturally. Fans want to see wins. To face old rivals. To jump in the car after work or school Friday and attend a road game Saturday. To talk smack with friends and coworkers who went to the school upstate. Those things are harder to do or are gone altogether in a sprawling mega-conference.

Sufficiently sliced, the Pac-12 has become vulnerable to other potential poachers, but it isn’t the only destabilized conference. The Atlantic Coast Conference’s Power 5 standing also is in jeopardy, as its members chafe under a long-term ESPN contract that caps revenue and locks them in until the mid-2030s. At least five schools may be expansion targets if they can reduce massive exit fees.

One longtime Power 5 athletic director told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED he always believed, for the good of the national landscape, that the top tier of college athletics wouldn't dwindle below about 65 teams and four conferences spread from coast to coast. A week into July he had changed his mind: “I think we’re headed to 35 to 40 teams in two super conferences.”

When no one cares about the whole, the strongest will survive at the expense of the others. Charming, isn’t it? □

CFB PLAYOFF PREDICTION: THE SEC STILL REIGNS

Despite the changes and uncertainties around realignment, coaches and transfers, the playoff song remains (almost) the same. SI’s Pat Forde shares his CFB bracket

1. ALABAMA

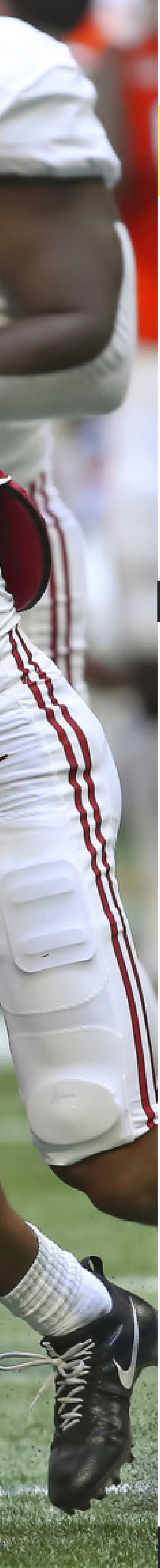
4. CLEMSON

2. OHIO STATE

3. GEORGIA

ALABAMA OVER OHIO STATE

HARRIS
ANDERSON
31



BAMA'S BRICK WALL
Anderson had 101 tackles in 2021, 31 of which were for a loss.

MICHAEL WADE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

1

ALABAMA

In 15 seasons in Tuscaloosa, **NICK SABAN** has won national championships with stifling defenses and wide-open offenses. So what will he do next?

by RICHARD JOHNSON

YOU CAN SPLIT Nick Saban's six national championships with Alabama into two parts.

The first chapter is best represented by the Tide's stomping of Notre Dame in the 2012 title game. Until then, Alabama didn't so much beat you as it sat on your chest until the clock ran out. The game plan was simple: Use a suffocating defense and a punishing run game to flatten the opponent, and the Tide were the biggest and best at it. But Saban recognized the start of a shift in the sport. Up-tempo offenses were beginning to give his team fits, and the coach wondered, "Is this [up-tempo style] what we want football to be?" Nonetheless, he realized his program would have to pivot.

After being in the title conversation for two years but not winning the crown, Saban's Tide were back on top after the 2015 season. He was equipped with an offensive force that was beginning to perfect the up-tempo, run-pass-option momentum that had captured the rest of the sport, with Lane Kiffin as offensive coordinator and QB Jalen Hurts taking over for Blake Barnett in the '16 opener. The zenith of Saban's second chapter came in '20, when the Tide broke the school record for yards per game by 20 with 541.6, and Mac Jones became only the second SEC quarterback at the time to throw for 4,500 yards (one season after Joe Burrow first reached the mark for LSU).

Does the 70-year-old Saban have another gear? Does he even need one?

This is the whole point of Saban's id—to not let success beget complacency, his mortal enemy. Consider the Tide's 2021 season. On the surface it was the same old Alabama. Quarterback Bryce Young won the Heisman Trophy, and the team reached the national championship game. Alabama was driving to potentially tie Georgia in the late stages before a last-minute pick-six, but this team was far from the juggernaut that won in '20. It lost a regular-season game and won unconvincingly multiple times and even entered two games as an underdog, snapping a 92-game streak of kicking off as a favorite. The offensive line struggled for nearly the entire regular season, while the defense didn't have a killer instinct.

Is this holding the Crimson Tide to a hilariously high standard? Yes. But Alabama is the standard, so where does it go next?

One answer may come off the field. Saban's recent spat with Texas A&M coach Jimbo Fisher was fueled by what many viewed as a threat. In front of business leaders in nearby Birmingham, Saban lamented that A&M had "bought every player," a nod to the rumored role of recruiting inducements beyond normal name, image and likeness compensation to boost the program to a No. 1 recruiting class in 2022 (Alabama finished second). Saban's comments were taken as a kick in the shins to do more to ensure the Tide's NIL infrastructure can compete with the biggest spenders in the sport moving forward. Alabama's '22 recruiting class currently resides within the top three, but it does not mean Saban is satisfied it will in perpetuity.

So the Tide has again dipped into the portal to grab some of its best players—mostly from the SEC—to help Young. Offensive line coach Eric Wolford comes in from Kentucky, where he spent one year building upon the Wildcats' recent trend as one of the best units in the country. He'll be tasked with revamping a line likely anchored by former Vanderbilt tackle Tyler Steen, one of three transfers who will have huge impacts on offense, in addition to wide receiver Jermaine Burton (Georgia) and running back Jahmyr Gibbs (Georgia Tech).

Will Anderson Jr., perhaps college football's best overall player, will lead the defense this season. The outside linebacker represents the one thing Saban's lineup has lacked during his tenure—a bona fide, pin-the-ears-back edge rusher. Alabama's best linemen tend to be on the interior. If Anderson has the season many are projecting, next April he will become by far the highest-drafted edge rusher Saban's Tide has produced. If the offensive line is back to road-grading for Gibbs and can take some pressure off Young, Alabama may be able to throw it back to something resembling the way Saban would rather play. The coach isn't thrilled with how the sport has trended; he was just pragmatic enough to know the way the game was going and steered the Tide into it better than anyone else.

Looking at how each of the other CFP entrants last season—especially Georgia—structured their teams shows that being defense-first can still keep you at the forefront of a national title push in the supercharged run-pass-option era. □

2

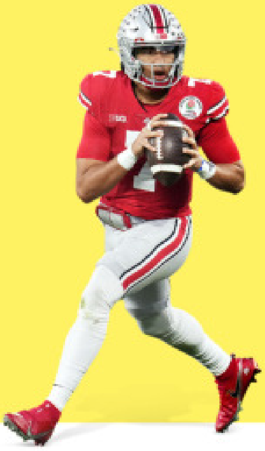
OHIO STATE

The Buckeyes are again a national championship threat, thanks to three strong Heisman Trophy hopefuls

LAST NOVEMBER in The Game, Michigan exposed Ohio State's limitations, outmuscling its rival and amassing 297 running yards in a 42–27 win that kept the Buckeyes out of the Big Ten championship. If Ohio State wants to give Alabama a run for its money this season, it will have to get stingier on defense. That responsibility falls under new defensive coordinator Jim Knowles, who left the same job at Oklahoma State, where he was the architect of a defense that was third in the nation in yards allowed. If Knowles can turn the D around, Ohio State should be able to challenge the Tide.

On offense the Buckeyes are loaded, especially at the skill positions. Quarterback C.J. Stroud is neck and neck with Bama QB Bryce Young atop the preseason Heisman race. But Stroud will face competition from his own team, which could feature the first trio of teammates to finish in the top 10 since 1973. Here's how the way-too-early leaderboard looks. —R.J.

2022 HEISMAN BEST BETS

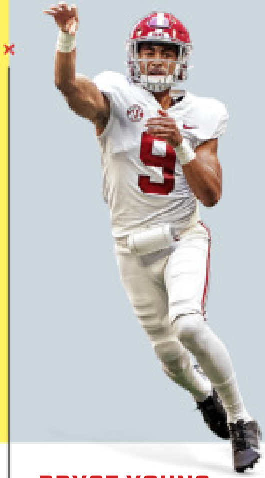


C.J. STROUD

QB × OHIO STATE

The redshirt sophomore completed 71.9% of his passes last year and threw for 4,435 yards and 44 touchdowns. And he is again surrounded by many weapons.

ODDS: +250



BRYCE YOUNG

QB × ALABAMA

The obligatory "There hasn't been a repeat Heisman winner since 1975" mantra applies here—but with a rebuilt line, the junior signal-caller will be upright more often this year.

ODDS: +350

CALEB WILLIAMS

QB × USC

He is in a new place but with a familiar face in Lincoln Riley, his coach at Oklahoma, calling the plays. Williams's legs add a run element that Heisman voters love.

ODDS: +900

BIJAN ROBINSON

RB × TEXAS

As a sophomore last season, he was in good shape (1,127 yards in 10 games) to challenge for the award until an elbow injury in mid-November. He'll be the Longhorns' workhorse.

ODDS: +2000

WILL ANDERSON JR.

LB × ALABAMA

The outside linebacker had 17½ sacks to finish fifth in voting last season. He'd be just the second defender to win (behind Michigan's Charles Woodson in 1997).

ODDS: +2500

JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA

WR × OHIO STATE

As a sophomore last season, he outshone first-round pick Chris Olave, snagging 95 passes for 1,606 yards. With Olave gone, will defenses focus more on him?

ODDS: +2800

DILLON GABRIEL

QB × OKLAHOMA

The Central Florida transfer could be the Sooners' eighth Heisman winner if the dual-threat talent he showed in Orlando is still there after a broken collarbone.

ODDS: +3500

TREVEYON HENDERSON

RB × OHIO STATE

In his third game as a Buckeye, he broke the school's single-game freshman rushing record held by Archie Griffin and finished the year with 19 all-purpose TDs.

ODDS: +4500

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: KEITH BIRMINGHAM/MEDIANEWS GROUP/PASADENA STAR-NEWS/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN D. LILES; BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS; MATTHEW VISINSKY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/ GETTY IMAGES; DAVID E. KLUTHO; KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS; JOSHUA A. BICKEL/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK

by PAT FORDE

photograph by
KEVIN D. LILES

Quarterback **STETSON BENNETT** became a local hero and national star after leading the Bulldogs to the CFP championship. Now he's back for more, and the expectations are even higher

GEORGIA

STETSON BENNETT is late. Rock-star late. It's more than an hour past our scheduled meeting time at the Georgia football facility, and venerable associate athletic director Claude Felton is driving us to a subdivision of townhomes on the edge of Athens in search of the Bulldogs' improbable star quarterback.

Felton, who has worked at his alma mater since before Herschel Walker enrolled in 1980, is flustered. He's adjusting to the odd audible that has been called. Bennett is supposed to be dropping off his truck at a teammate's home to have it detailed, and the plan is to meet him there to squeeze in some extra interview time while driving back to the facility.

Except Bennett isn't at the teammate's house, either. We pull into a parking spot and wait some more, awkward small talk interspersed with the checking of phones. Eighty minutes after the original meeting time, just when we're about to give up, Bennett comes through. Georgia fans can likely relate.

Bennett pulls up in his black Ford F-150 Raptor pickup. He climbs into the back of Felton's car and apologizes profusely. "I have a date tonight," he says, explaining why he wants his truck fancied up. Bennett doesn't go into detail, but when asked whether he's the most eligible bachelor in Athens, he laughs sheepishly and says, "I guess so, yeah."

Stetson Fleming Bennett IV becoming a college heartthrob and timeless hero to the masses who follow Georgia football still takes some getting used to, for him and his family back home in Blackshear, Ga., four hours south of Athens. "Anonymity is gone," says his mom, Denise. "He's still Stet, still my boy. I'm still reminding him to get his oil changed. But some things have changed. I'm very thankful he's 24 and not 18."

"Stet" is a star quarterback now, evolving into the position and the persona, a disorienting reality after years of being doubted and considered disposable. Once the undersized walk-on who walked off after one season, went to junior college and returned only to be serially demoted, he became the Offensive MVP of the College Football Playoff championship game. In the annals of underdog athletic triumphs, this one ranks right up there.

And now, he's back for the encore, a sixth-year senior ready for a final season in the role he'd wanted since he was a toddler. It's been a hell of a victory lap since he

helped deliver Georgia's first national championship in 41 years last January at Lucas Oil Stadium: getting the celebratory first sip from a family friend's bottle of 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkle; flying as a celebrity guest inside a jet with the Blue Angels; being asked for selfies outside the Sistine Chapel in Rome and in front of Michelangelo's David in Florence during a May study-abroad trip; and receiving name, image and likeness opportunities commensurate with being the biggest man on campus.

Now, it's time to get back to football and answer the next question: Without a historically great defense backing him, can Stetson Bennett come through again?

* * *

STETSON BENNETT wasn't just born to be a Bulldog; he was nearly born in Sanford Stadium, where his parents had season tickets. Stetson III remembers a very pregnant Denise thinking she was going into labor during a Georgia-Kentucky game on Oct. 25, 1997. Three days later, Stetson IV arrived.

By age 3, Stetson IV was telling his dad he wanted to play quarterback at Georgia. That was all the motivation Stetson III needed to become a youth league coach. He bought an acre lot next to his pharmacy and turned it into a football field, organizing a team and feeding the boys peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before putting them through a Bible devotional, study hall, a CrossFit workout and, finally, practice. Even by south Georgia standards, this was intense.

"I felt like I owed football," says Stetson III, whose father, Buddy, was a football coach. "Football educated my daddy, and he had five kids and we're all educated. I felt like football broke the cycle for our family."

An outstanding athlete, Stet excelled throwing and running (and playing baseball). By high school, he was a star in the making at relatively small Pierce County High. He put up big numbers, earning his nickname, The Mailman, for always delivering. He led his school to three straight state playoff berths, but his small stature (generously listed now at 5' 11") kept major college recruiters away.

An acknowledged "unrealistic coach and daddy," Stetson III at one point set off on a two-week driving trip through Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas to market his son as high-level college quarterback material. He had an iPad loaded with Stet's game videos, stopping at several FBS programs and trying to talk his way in. Often, he got no further than a graduate assistant who was willing to look at the video for a brief time. Sometimes, he didn't get that far.

Still, Stet was rated a two-star

ON THE UPTICK

Bennett improved his completion percentage from 55.5 in 2020 to 64.5 in '21.

AUSTIN MCAFEE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

NO QUIT IN QB
After walking on at Georgia, Bennett led the Bulldogs to the 2021 title.

KEVIN D. LILES

recruit and received just one FBS scholarship offer, from Middle Tennessee. The best he could get from his dream school was a chance to walk on. In the spring of 2017, he took it and began the humbling experience. His assigned jersey—No. 22—was an insult in and of itself, more appropriate for a defensive back than a quarterback. He got half a locker, No. 122 A, sharing the space with No. 122 B, fellow walk-on QB John Seter. Their general rule: Whoever got to the locker first could claim the space for the day.

But instead of being intimidated or discouraged by his place in the hierarchy, the cocksure QB was motivated by it. Assigned to the scout team, Bennett set out to frustrate the first-team defense in practice and catch the eye of coach Kirby Smart by executing the opponent's plays to perfection.

"The most blunt way to say it, he had a 'f--- you' attitude," says Seter, who is now playing at Limestone University in Gaffney, S.C., but remains close friends with Bennett. "And it was awesome."

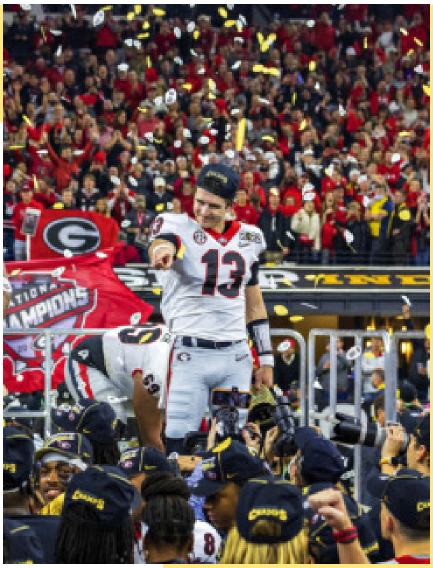
But scout-team glory doesn't always translate to playing time, especially when Jake Fromm led the Bulldogs to a spot in the CFP title game. Then there was incoming mega-recruit Justin Fields. With his path to competing for the starting job blocked, Stet transferred to Jones County Junior College in Ellisville, Miss. "I wasn't interested in being a frat kid on the football team," he says. "I wanted to play ball."

After a stellar season there, he was ready to sign with Louisiana-Lafayette when Georgia called on signing day to offer a scholarship. Fields had transferred to Ohio State, and the job backing up Fromm was wide open. The coaches asked for an immediate decision. The FU QB told them they could wait a spell and consulted his parents. Dad was all in. Mom was worried about her son again being buried on the depth chart. Still, he knew he would regret not giving himself every opportunity to try again. He went back to Athens.

Stet played well in spot relief in 2019, and his assumption that Fromm would turn pro after that season proved correct. The opportunity to win the starting job was right there in front of him in '20. Then Georgia went heavy in the transfer market, taking in starters Jamie Newman from Wake Forest and JT Daniels from USC. Freshman D'Wan Mathis also was given a shot. Stetson calls the situation a "fiasco" that caused him to consider leaving again. But Newman left before the season began, Daniels was slowly recovering from a knee injury, and Mathis was in over his head. Bennett grabbed the starting spot after the opener and played with a verve and daring that at times were unsupported by his physical talent. When he and Mathis were ineffective in a bad loss against rival Florida, Georgia turned to Daniels and finished 8–2 on the year. It was assumed the Bulldogs would turn to him for '21, as well.

That demotion didn't last long. Daniels struggled with injuries early last year, and, by Week 4, Bennett had taken over the starting job, complementing an all-time great defense as Georgia rolled through the regular season 12–0. The only question was whether he could make the necessary plays to win when the defense was not dominant.

The test came against a rare underdog Alabama team in the SEC title game. The Bulldogs' defense



DAVID E. KLUTHO

“We have the wants and desires of millions of Georgia fans on us. **THAT’S A PRETTY HEAVY LOAD,”** BENNETT SAYS.

played its worst game of the season, and Bennett made a couple of critical errors in a stunning rout that raised all the old fears in the fan base, with much of the college football punditocracy wondering whether a switch back to Daniels was Georgia’s best move. Stet’s parents couldn’t help but notice how quickly the Bennett bandwagon emptied again.

“If I’m speaking from the flesh, it sucks,” Denise says. “If I’m speaking from where I need to be, it’s a learning curve. It would be harder for someone who was a five-star recruit who was lauded and didn’t become a starter. . . . Do I say things in response in my mirror at night? Yes, I do. Loud and proud. Then I get over it.”

The playoff became the ultimate validation for Bennett and the Bulldogs. They destroyed Michigan 34–11 in the Orange Bowl, scoring the first five times they had the ball, with Stet throwing for 313 yards and three touchdowns. That earned a rematch with Georgia’s demon, Alabama, with everything on the line—including, fair or not, Stetson Bennett’s legacy.

“No matter what, it’s never going to be normal again,” Denise thought. “Win or lose.”

With that defining night hung in the balance with Georgia trailing Alabama 18–13 in the fourth quarter of the CFP national championship, offensive coordinator Todd Monken did Bennett a favor by opening up the playbook. Monken called five straight pass plays, resulting in three completions, an Alabama interference penalty and a sack. On second-and-18 from the Alabama 40, Bennett went deep to Adonai Mitchell for the go-ahead score.

After stopping the Tide, Georgia pounded the ball downfield to a third-and-1 at the Alabama 15. That’s when Bennett found tight end Brock Bowers for a 15-yard touchdown that produced an eight-point lead and put the Bulldogs on the brink of a title. Stet had done everything in those two drives after a disastrous fumble earlier in the quarter helped the Tide extend their lead.

“If you’re thinking, *Oh my goodness, if I don’t throw this ball perfect, then it’s over,* you’re screwed,” Bennett says. “If you’re thinking of the magnitude of every play on every play? Forget it, man.”

After a late Georgia pick-six sealed the game, he finally let it go. “I didn’t let myself think about what would happen if we won or lost,” Bennett says. “If you do, you get overwhelmed—like, it’s a big deal. We have the wants and desires of millions of Georgia fans on us. That’s a pretty heavy load. I literally felt all that slide off my shoulders and I started crying.”

There was a second catharsis when Stetsons III and IV saw each other postgame.

“A lot of tears,” Stetson III says. “Literally, this is what we worked for. We wanted to win a championship for the University of Georgia. Who ever gets the opportunity to be what he said he wanted to be at 3 years old?”

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BACK AT THE Georgia facility, the improbable rockstar quarterback shows his command in the team’s offensive meeting. Looking at big-screen diagrams of the plays the offense will run through, he rattles off the reads and keys for multiple positions. On the field, he chatters nonstop with staffers or fellow quarterbacks. When it’s time to run sprints at the end of the workout, he showcases his conditioning.

Disarmingly candid and quick with a quip, he is more comfortable in his dream role than he has ever been. With the NFL uninterested in undersized quarterbacks with ordinary arm strength, the decision to stay in school and reap the NIL benefits of being a local hero was an easy one. And, for once, Bennett enters the season without having to look over his shoulder. There is no doubt who will lead Georgia into the opener.

"I've got the greatest gig in the world," he says. "It's going to be different, in a good way."

Bennett's preparations have included poring over film from every 2021 game—twice—looking for areas to improve. He has sharpened his footwork, which he described as "a little flippant" last season. He has been vigilant on the practice field about his upper-body mechanics as well, constantly checking his arm positioning and torso torque.

Something else that is different: There likely will be a greater need for Bennett to be a centerpiece of the team. Last season Georgia's formula was to build a lead and let its defense, which allowed an NCAA-stingiest 10.2 points per game, suffocate opponents. It wasn't a constant necessity for Bennett to make big plays, though he is certainly capable. He was third nationally in yards per attempt at 10.0, and Georgia ranked in the top 10 with 30 passing plays of 30 yards or more, but he was just 79th in attempts (287).

But with eight of the record 15 players drafted off last year's team coming from the defense, five of whom were taken in the first round, Georgia will need more of Bennett to have a shot at a repeat national title. It also is replacing its top two rushers and No. 1 deep threat. "We're on top of the world, but we're going to see the world here in a few weeks," he says. "Better be ready."

In his element, Bennett shows some characteristics of the historical figure he gravitated to during that European trip, the "Unearthing the Past" program led by Georgia professor of classics Mario Erasmo. A history buff, Bennett studied everything related to Julius Caesar, the most famous of Roman emperors and generals. "Like Caesar, Stetson plays to win," Erasmo says.

Yet Bennett is the counterpoint to Caesar's ancient warning to conquering Roman heroes. According to legend, an enslaved person was assigned to whisper in the ear of returning generals, "Sic transit gloria mundi"—*all glory is fleeting*. For Stetson Bennett IV, the hero no one saw coming, Georgia Bulldogs glory is forever. □

4

MICHIGAN

The Wolverines finally cleared a major hurdle in the Harbaugh era, but can they go beyond just a playoff spot and win it all?

THE WOLVERINES HAD their long-awaited Harbaugh Breakthrough last season, then avoided losing their coach to the NFL after an extended dalliance with the Vikings. Jim Harbaugh and Michigan finally delivered, pummeling nemesis Ohio State to win the Big Ten East, routed Iowa to take the league title and crashed the College Football Playoff for the first time.

But what happened when they got there wasn't pretty—Michigan was manhandled 34–11 by eventual national champion Georgia in a game that was essentially over by halftime. There is work to do, replacing both coordinators and three defensive players taken in the NFL draft. But Michigan's starting point is higher than it has been in years.

The Wolverines could have Harbaugh's best offense as he enters his eighth season on the job. He must manage playing time at quarterback with Cade McNamara and J.J. McCarthy, but either player can win. Their top receivers return, including Ronnie Bell, who is coming back from an ACL tear in last year's season opener. Running back Blake Corum

DAVID E. KLUTHO

(1,397 all-purpose yards) and sophomore Donovan Edwards provide big-play threats. The offensive line lost some stalwarts but picked up standout Virginia transfer Olusegun Oluwatimi.

Defensively, Michigan has to rebuild its pass rush and improve its perimeter coverage. Georgia exposed weaknesses in the latter, and Ohio State has the weapons to do the same. A unit that held 10 opponents to fewer than 20 points last season could struggle to replicate that feat.

In each of the previous three seasons that Michigan opened with at least four straight home games, it won 10 or more contests (2011, '16, '21). The Wolverines don't leave the Big House until October, so they will be in the CFP conversation from the start. But Michigan will face fierce competition for those coveted four spots. —P.F.

WITH A WHIMPER
Michigan was stonewalled by Georgia in its first CFP appearance, in 2021.

HERE'S SI'S PROJECTION OF HOW THE CFP RANKINGS WILL LOOK WHEN THEY'RE FIRST REVEALED ON NOV. 1

1. **Ohio State.** The Buckeyes could face as many as five ranked opponents in the first two months. Win them all, and they'll be the early leader.

2. **Alabama.** The Tide have lost just one game before November in six years. An at Arkansas–Texas A&M–at Tennessee stretch in October is challenging but navigable.

3. **Georgia.** Unless Oregon pulls an opening-day surprise, the Bulldogs should be undefeated and largely untested coming out of the Cocktail Party vs. Florida on Oct. 29.

4. **Michigan.** A soft September schedule, with no Power 5 nonconference opponents and the first four games at home, provides the runway for a fast start.

5. **Clemson.** The Tigers play top ACC contenders Wake Forest (road) and NC State (home) on consecutive Saturdays, then follow with two more on the road. Get through that, and they'll start 8–0.

6. **Oklahoma.** The schedule is backloaded for the Sooners, with prime Big 12 competitors Baylor and Oklahoma State in November. The only road games early are against Nebraska and TCU.

7. **Utah.** The Utes have some résumé builders in the first eight games: a splashy opener at Florida, dangerous San Diego State, then three of their first five Pac-12 games on the road.

8. **Notre Dame.** The Fighting Irish can lose their opener at Ohio State and still be fine. Win it, and they'll be ranked much higher than this.

9. **Tennessee.** Six of the Vols' first eight games are at home. If they can win at Pitt and LSU and beat Florida and Kentucky in Knoxville, they'll start 7–1. Georgia supplies a reality check on Nov. 5.

10. **Houston.** The Cougars could enter November as the latest undefeated-and-unloved Group of 5 team, if they can get through opening tests at UTSA and Texas Tech.

5+6

NOTRE DAME AND UTAH

The Fighting Irish and Utes can control their CFP destinies with winning starts on opening weekend, but the margin for error afterward is slim to none

COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S kickoff weekend stretches from Thursday to Monday, encompassing 83 games and delivering 250 hours of football. There are plenty of intriguing opening matchups with dramatic story lines, but the most interesting duels will take place in Columbus and Gainesville. Ohio State welcomes Notre Dame, while Florida hosts Utah, two matchups that should give us an idea of the 2022 landscape.

In 2021 the Irish were fighting for playoff real estate until the last weekend, amid the off-field drama of coach Brian Kelly jumping ship to LSU when a top-four spot was still up for grabs. Notre Dame (11–2) finished eighth in the final rankings, but it also lost its starting quarterback (Jack Coan), top running back (Kyren Williams) and best receiver (Kevin Austin) from last year. New boss Marcus Freeman, promoted from defensive coordinator, opens with a big test against the sport's most consistent program for the past 20 years. The Irish still bring back 15 starters—including sacks leader Isaiah Foskey—and added transfer Brandon Joseph, a former Northwestern star safety who was first-team Big Ten. Junior **Chris Tyree** will also step up at running back.

Utah finished 12th in the CFP rankings last year at 10–4, but given its Pac-12 title (the victory over Oregon doused the Ducks' own CFP hopes) and first Rose Bowl appearance, expectations will again be high. Coach Kyle Whittingham will venture into

▾ A LOOK AT FOUR MORE CAN'T-MISS SEASON OPENERS

W. VIRGINIA AT PITT

Sept. 1

The Backyard Brawl returns after 10 years! Separated by just 79 miles, the Panthers are coming off their best season (11–3) since the Dan Marino days, while the Mountaineers are still looking for a breakout year.

CINCY AT ARKANSAS

Sept. 3

Coach Luke Fickell and the Bearcats follow up a CFP appearance and No. 4 ranking with a trip to SEC country, where the Hogs are riding high after a nine-win year in coach Sam Pittman's second season.

one of the sport's more hostile venues, where he and QB **Cameron Rising** will get a dose of September weather at The Swamp. Utah is pesky on defense—hence the unit's RSNB moniker, Relentless Smart Nasty Ballhawks—and will receive a boost from former Gators linebacker Mohamoud Diabate, who transferred after leading Florida in tackles in 2021.

Opening victories from the Utes and Irish will lead to serious CFP talk for both programs—but there's one significant difference. Because of its schedule and pedigree, Notre Dame can lose its opener and still work its way back into the title conversation by November. Utah, however, can't afford to stumble if it wants to crash the CFP party. —*Ross Dellenger*

BOB KUPBENS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (NOTRE DAME); SEAN M. HAFFEY/GETTY IMAGES (UTAH); KEN RUINARD/USA TODAY SPORTS (CLEMSON)

GEORGIA VS. OREGON

Sept. 3 (at Atlanta)

Dan Lanning's first opponent as Oregon's coach is none other than his former team—and the reigning national champion. A 2,700-mile trip across three time zones won't help him and his team, either.

LSU VS. FLORIDA ST

Sept. 4 (at New Orleans)

This feels like a big one for Seminoles coach Mike Norvell, now in his third season at a place that is itching for victories—especially ones like this, directly in the Big Easy spotlight against new LSU coach Brian Kelly.

7 CLEMSON

The Tigers have been better than most at retaining their coordinators, but this year the team joins the crowd of programs that are dealing with change near the top

COACHING CHANGES are the norm in modern college football. This year only eight schools will enter the season having had the same coach and top coordinators for three straight seasons. Clemson had been unusually stable, as coach Dabo Swinney has had just four OCs and three DCs since taking over full time in 2009, largely because the Tigers have paid their coordinators well to limit the turnover.

But this year Swinney had to replace both OC Tony Elliott (gone to Virginia) and DC Brent Venables (now at Oklahoma). **Brandon Streeter** will now run the offense, while Wes Goodwin and Mickey Conn will pair to lead the defense. All are internal promotions, which will put Swinney's Clemson family model to the test after the perennial CFP qualifier slipped to 10–3 last year.

Other notable hires this season include:

- **Georgia:** Co-DCs Will Muschamp and Glenn Schumann (promoted internally)
- **Notre Dame:** DC Al Golden (from the Cincinnati Bengals)
- **Oklahoma State:** DC Derek Mason (Auburn)
- **Ohio State:** DC Jim Knowles (Oklahoma State)
- **Penn State:** DC Manny Diaz (Miami)
- **Texas A&M:** DC D.J. Durkin (Ole Miss)
- **Miami:** OC Josh Gattis (Michigan)
- **Oklahoma:** OC Jeff Lebby (Ole Miss) —R.J.

8

TEXAS A&M

NIL deals are putting the NCAA's elite program on notice, and no school is using them better than the Aggies, who have assembled a historic collection of talent

by ROSS DELLENGER

THE WHISPERS WITHIN the Southeastern Conference about Texas A&M's haul of highly ranked recruits began in earnest last fall.

As soon as coach **Jimbo Fisher** polished off his group—the best signing class in more than 20 years of recruiting rankings—allegations of recruiting misdeeds grew more public. During a February press conference, Ole Miss coach Lane Kiffin playfully asked whether the Aggies would "incur a luxury tax [for] how much they paid for their signing class," while Alabama coach Nick Saban told a local group of businessmen in May that A&M "bought every player."

Recruiting battles turn ugly in the SEC on a good day, but in Year 1 of athletes earning money from their name, image and likeness, Texas A&M became the poster child for using NIL as a tool to land prospects. Across the NCAA landscape, college football's biggest donors are using NIL deals to bankroll their teams, outbidding one another for talent and driving up the market in college sports' newest arms race. Some of these savvy businesspeople have orchestrated ventures, called collectives, that pool

MARIA LYSAKER/USA TODAY SPORTS

millions of dollars to distribute to athletes under the guise of endorsement opportunities and appearance fees. (One Texas Tech collective, for example, has offered $25,000 deals to every football player on scholarship.)

While Texas A&M has made the biggest splash so far, a handful of other programs are creating waves. Tennessee, Miami, USC, Texas and Nebraska are landing high-level college transfers and reeling in five-star high school players, many driven by individual megaboosters or high-rolling donor collectives. The six schools—all high-resource programs with aggressive donors—are estimated to be among the biggest NIL spenders.

Some believe the moves are striking fear in blueblood universities—such as Alabama, Clemson, Georgia and Ohio State—that have dominated the sport for more than a decade. "I guess people don't like A&M disrupting the power base of college football," Aggies athletic director Ross Bjork says. "I don't know why Nick Saban would say what he said except he's threatened."

Should he be? Will this group of top-spending programs see a return—conference or national titles—on their boosters' investments?

"That's still to be determined," says Blake Lawrence, CEO of Opendorse, a company that provides resources to the athlete endorsement industry and specializes in NIL. "If USC has a monster year in football, and Miami has a big year, if some of the young players at Texas A&M do well, those are the story lines that will reverberate throughout the fall."

Many of the biggest spenders have another thing in common: They're in the midst of historic slides. The last time Tennessee won a conference championship was 1998, while Miami (2003), Nebraska (1999) and Texas A&M ('98) haven't claimed a league title since they all changed conferences. Texas is on its longest conference championship drought (12 years) since the early '40s, and USC has won only once in the past 13 seasons.

Thirsting for a championship, these programs' ambitions in the NIL space have reaped benefits. A&M's top-ranked signing class includes eight five-star prospects, the most in a single class. It includes four of the top five defensive line prospects in the nation, two of the top three receivers, the No. 2–ranked quarterback, the second-best safety and fifth-best running back.

"NIL has totally changed recruiting," Kiffin says. "I joke all the time about it. Facilities and all that. Go ahead and build facilities and these great weight rooms and training rooms, but you ain't gonna have any good players in them if you don't have NIL money."

But the introduction of NIL money has coincided with relaxed transfer rules, leading to questions about the sustainability. Will boosters keep donating money to collectives for players who have never played a down of college football and can leave town freely?

"Do we want a new weight room or do we want to spend it on a 17-year-old who may or may not pan out?" asks former Alabama quarterback and current

ESPN analyst Greg McElroy. "The Yankees have the highest payroll in baseball, but they don't win the World Series every year."

It's not just the millionaire boosters who are contributing money to acquire players, though. Texas A&M already has a strong history of donors—the university completed a $450 million renovation to Kyle Field in 2015, recently announced a $120 million fundraising drive for a new indoor practice facility and renovations to the football operations building—so it could afford to give Fisher a guaranteed 10-year, $75 million contract. The early returns: The Aggies finished 9–1 in '20, took down Alabama last year and signed that star-studded class of recruits in February.

While it could take years to see how this top recruiting class pans out, the Aggies still need to find a way to get past the Tide to win the SEC West. Texas A&M has yet to decide on its starting quarterback, but Fisher has strong choices in sophomore Haynes King and LSU transfer Max Johnson. (Third in line is five-star recruit Conner Weigman.) Whoever wins the job will have strong targets in freshman Evan Stewart and senior Chase Lane. D.J. Durkin comes over from Ole Miss to take over the defensive unit and will have to find answers for the departures of DeMarvin Leal and Tyree Johnson.

But can they claim the SEC crown, advance to the College Football Playoff and win it all? Since 2002, every school that has signed a No. 1–ranked recruiting class has won a national title within the next four years, according to Mike Farrell, who has been covering college football recruiting since 1997. "Jimbo is going to win a national championship. It's a formula that can't be beat," says Farrell.

However, unequal pay could result in locker room problems—players earning lofty NIL salaries may not find playing time or a transfer. And will there be entanglements between boosters and coaches on the management of the roster? "Just because you gave somebody a lot of money, doesn't mean they play," says Gerry DiNardo, the former LSU and Indiana coach who now works for the Big Ten Network. "What happens if they are spending money on the wrong players? I am a firm believer that college football is a 'have' and 'have-nots' business and regardless of how the rules change, it will never turn a 'have' into a 'have-not' and will never make a 'have-not' into a 'have.' "

Coastal Carolina coach Jamey Chadwell hopes to see more parity in the game but doesn't believe NIL is the answer. "Your Alabamas and Georgias are up there for a reason already—great coaches, facilities and money to invest," he says. "If A&M is putting in a lot of money, I'd assume Alabama is going to top that."

Well, maybe.

For years, Texas and Texas A&M's athletic departments have routinely amassed more donations than any other school in the country. Last year, the Aggies pulled in $47.7 million in donations—one-fifth of the total donations to the 13 SEC public schools combined. (Texas led all schools at $60 million.)

RICH BARNES/USA TODAY SPORTS

“Somebody better figure out how to compete with Texas and Texas A&M,” says Baton Rouge injury lawyer Gordon McKernan, an LSU graduate and donor who expects to spend $500,000 of his own money this year on NIL ventures. “What is oil, $100 a barrel right now?”

“Everyone knows NIL is here to stay,” A&M’s Bjork says. “We’ve embraced it. We have all the tools and technology. We are educating our athletes and boosters. The part that is frustrating is to say NIL is the only reason kids are choosing our program. That is hypocritical, and I don’t know why we are the target.

“We aren’t done and we aren’t going anywhere.” □

9 WAKE FOREST

The Demon Deacons should be a treat to watch for fans of offensive football, because the team that rang up so many points last year could be even more potent this time around

IF YOU MISSED Wake Forest’s electric offense last season, you’ll have a second chance in 2022. The unit that averaged 41.0 points, fourth best in ’21, has nine starters returning, including juniors QB Sam Hartman and wideout A.T. Perry. And replacing WR Jaquarii Roberson, now in camp with the Dallas Cowboys, is Donavon Greene, who missed last season with an injury but showed promise as a freshman.

The Deacs run an RPO system so bespoke that their coordinator, Warren Ruggiero, told Sports Illustrated last season, “There aren’t too many teams that have tried to just sit there and defend us the same way one year after another. It’s kinda weird.” Ruggiero and coach Dave Clawson have worked together for 13 seasons, at Wake and at Bowling Green before that, perfecting their Clawfense. On defense Wake Forest is not going to stop a nosebleed, so its games should keep the scoreboard operator busy. —R.J.

ON THE MARK
Hartman heads into the season with 9,266 career passing yards.

10

by
PAT FORDE

illustration BY
MICHAEL BYERS

LINCOLN RILEY's move to Cali isn't the only thing changing for the Trojans, but the coach's arrival and eventual move to the Big Ten puts USC on a better track to revive its glory days on the gridiron

USC

BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT that would remake the college football landscape, USC was already embarking upon a season of major change. The Trojans had brought in a big-name new coach, Lincoln Riley, poached from Oklahoma at great expense, and he was soon followed by a veritable Rose Parade of star transfers, led by Sooners freshman-sensation quarterback Caleb Williams. After the dismal Clay Helton era, in which USC went 46–24 over eight seasons, Riley was set to improve on that record, and do it quickly.

Then on June 30, the Trojans announced their really big move—that they will join the Big Ten in 2024, along with city sidekick UCLA. Suddenly USC fans who had traveled to Tucson and Tempe are now going to have to update their wardrobes and pack the hand warmers and bench heaters for late-season games in the Midwest and Northeast.

But forget about the fans—the change may have even been a jolt to Riley, who now faces long trips and blue lips his third year on the job, if indeed there is a third year. He said the right things in a school release that quoted several coaches in the days after the jarring shift was made public: "This move to the Big Ten Conference positions all of our teams for long-term success. It provides our student-athletes with more exposure, new resources and challenges them with elite competition. USC Football is excited to compete in the Big Ten."

But in January a source familiar with USC's hiring process told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED that when Riley's previous employer, Oklahoma, decided last summer to make a similarly seismic move along with Texas to the SEC by 2025, the coach was not a fan of the relocation. "I don't think the SEC fit was particularly enticing or popular," the source said.

However Riley may be feeling about the looming move to the Big Ten, he is quickly implementing his blueprint for the Trojans. In addition to bringing along QB Williams to L.A., he lured from Norman a rising star wide receiver in Mario Williams. He also added three notable wideouts from the transfer portal—2021 Biletnikoff winner Jordan Addison (Pittsburgh); Brenden Rice, son of Jerry (Colorado); and Terrell Bynum (Washington). Add in yet another transfer, dynamic multipurpose running back Travis Dye (Oregon), and Riley already has the versatile weapons he needs to put his trademark pretty plays into practice. The defense this year will be a challenge, as USC was soft on that side of the ball last year, allowing 31.8 points per game. While Riley brought Alex Grinch over from Oklahoma to run the D, it looks like the Trojans will be in the same position as his old Sooners squads. But Riley still has a couple of years to get the program ready for those Big Ten slugfests.

Where will USC be when the Great Migration begins in 2024? Probably on a better talent plane. While Riley's first five class-of-'23 commitments were offensive skill players who had either been on his radar at Oklahoma or were from the Sooners' backyard recruiting hot spot of Texas, he has since focused on defense and linemen.

If the Trojans need to work overtime to elevate their talent to compete in their new conference, they will at least be paid handsomely to make the effort. There are estimates of a $1 billion-plus payday for the league in the near future. That's enough reason to flout tradition and geographic sense these days. The Big Ten's new media rights deal is a geyser, showering money from California to New Jersey.

That geyser is not just attractive but necessary because, to the South, the SEC is printing money nearly as quickly. These two rival conferences—backed by rival television networks—have destabilized the rest of the Power 5 in moving to 16 teams each. At SEC media days in July, commissioner Greg Sankey boldly declared his conference a "super league" and flatly answered "yes" to a question about whether adding Texas and Oklahoma is better than the Big Ten's addition of USC and UCLA. For now, on paper, that is correct. Adding USC and UCLA will create more money, though, which theoretically will allow the Big Ten to compete on more even footing with the SEC. But the two teams from L.A. will enter a conference that is on the wrong side of a wide gap in on-field performance.

Three SEC schools have won the last three College Football Playoff national championships (LSU, Alabama and Georgia), and Auburn and Florida have won titles within the past 15 years. The Big Ten's only title since 2002 is Ohio State's, and the Buckeyes are the only school from that conference to win a championship this century. In the playoff era, which began with the '14 season, the SEC is 14–5 with five titles. The Big Ten is 3–5 with one. Ohio State is the only Big Ten member to have won a playoff game, with Michigan State ('15) and Michigan ('21) being routed in the semifinals by SEC opponents. The high-powered Buckeyes look like the strongest challenger this year to continued SEC hegemony. But with No. 1 Alabama and No. 3 Georgia, the road to the next national title still runs through the South.

The West Coast hasn't seen a glimpse of the national championship in a long time, not since USC won its second straight, in 2004. The Trojans narrowly missed a third title the following season, losing a classic BCS championship game to Vince Young's Texas team, and ever since there have been diminishing returns for the preeminent program in Pacific time. Only two Pac-12 teams have ever qualified for the College Football Playoff: Oregon in the '14 season and Washington in '16.

Riley was hired, at great expense, to change that. Moving to the Big Ten is a disorienting plot twist in the Trojans' quest for a return to glory. But this much is certain: Getting onboard with one of the two superpower conferences in college football is the surest path toward having a chance. □

11

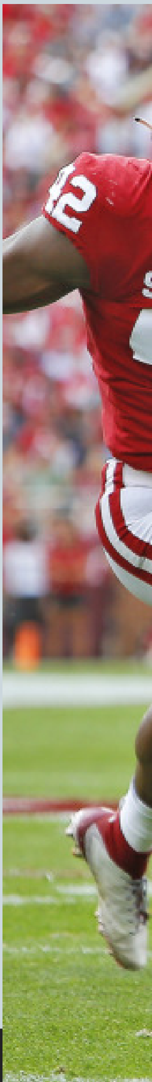
OKLAHOMA

No team exemplifies the modern trend of school-hopping quarterbacks better than the Sooners, who will be led this year by a most unlikely player

IF SOMEONE HAD told you last October an injured quarterback watching from the sidelines at Central Florida would begin the next season as Oklahoma's starter, you might have wondered about that person's grip on reality.

Yet here we are. Redshirt junior **Dillon Gabriel** transferred from the Knights and appears poised to lead a Sooners team that lost both of its starting quarterbacks from last season. Spencer Rattler, a Heisman favorite entering 2021, is now starting over at South Carolina. Caleb Williams, who supplanted Rattler last October as a freshman in the middle of a road game against Texas, is also no longer in Norman. Williams followed departed coach Lincoln Riley to USC, where—wouldn't you know it—2021 Trojans starter Kedon Slovis has moved on, taking over at Pittsburgh.

Welcome to the QB Shuffle. The NCAA's decision in April 2021 to allow players to transfer and play right away, instead of sitting out a full season first, has triggered mass movement at football's most high-profile position as many quarterbacks seek



playing time or a fresh start.

At Oklahoma, new coach Brent Venables, who had been defensive coordinator at Clemson, begins his tenure with a QB who has loads of experience and talent. Gabriel missed much of last year with a clavicle injury, but in 2020 he threw for 3,570 yards, 32 TDs and only four interceptions. Gabriel had entered the transfer portal last November, publicly committed to UCLA and then, just before classes began in L.A., switched to Oklahoma on the same day that Williams entered the portal. (Williams's landing at crosstown rival USC doubled the Bruins' pain.)

Gabriel has much to live up to in Oklahoma, as transfer quarterbacks there have quite a legacy of success. Jalen Hurts, after leaving Alabama, was a Heisman runner-up for the Sooners in 2019. He was preceded by Kyler Murray (coming from Texas A&M) and Baker Mayfield (Texas Tech), both of whom won Heismans while quarterbacking Riley's team. Are you noticing a trend? —R.D.

A FRESH START, AGAIN
Gabriel (8, in spring game) initially committed to UCLA but landed at OU.

QBs ON THE MOVE

CALEB WILLIAMS

OKLAHOMA ▸ USC

Williams and half of Riley's coaching staff were part of an exodus from Norman to L.A. that included the Sooners' top receiver and running back.

SPENCER RATTLER

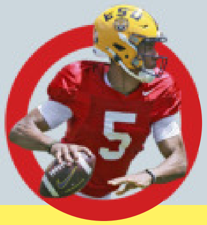
OKLAHOMA ▸ SOUTH CAROLINA

Booed off the field in Norman, Rattler has found a new home in the SEC East, where he'll look to rebound from his benching in a disappointing 2021.

QUINN EWERS

OHIO STATE ▸ TEXAS

Ewers spent four months in Columbus and left after taking all of two snaps. No quarterback has played so little and received so much hype.



JAYDEN DANIELS

ARIZONA STATE ▸ LSU

Daniels leaves the soft Pac-12 South for the toughest division in college football, the SEC West. He'll compete with Myles Brennan to start.

KEDON SLOVIS

USC ▸ PITT

He disappointed after a strong freshman season in 2019, and now the senior must replace Kenny Pickett, who led the Panthers to their first ACC title.

BO NIX

AUBURN ▸ OREGON

It's rare for an SEC starting QB to change teams, but Nix leaves to reunite with Ducks OC Kenny Dillingham, who had coached him with the Tigers in 2019.

BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES (GABRIEL); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); COURTESY OF SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS (RATTLER); ADAM DAVIS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (EWERS); JOHN KORDUNER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (DANIELS); COURTESY OF PITT ATHLETICS (SLOVIS); ABBIE PARR/GETTY IMAGES (NIX)

NC STATE

The loaded Wolfpack are on the verge of a conference crown, thanks to a quarterback who leads our list of dark-horse Heisman hopefuls

AFTER A 9–3 SEASON, can the Wolfpack make the jump to elite in 2022? With quarterback **Devin Leary** at the helm, NC State can dream of challenging for the ACC title that's eluded the program since 1979.

Consistent under center and often showing off pinpoint accuracy, Leary threw for 35 touchdowns and just five interceptions in a breakout 2021 season, recording only one game in which he failed to pass for multiple scores. The redshirt junior's ceiling could be even higher this fall with plenty of returning production around him, as the Wolfpack look to eclipse the 10-win mark for the first time since '02.

Leary faces long preseason odds in Vegas to take home the coveted Heisman Trophy, but it would be far from the first time an under-the-radar contender stormed his way into the conversation—or took the award home. (Joe Burrow, anyone?) —*Molly Geary*

2022 HEISMAN SLEEPERS

GRAYSON McCALL

QB × COASTAL CAROLINA

McCall has led the Chanticleers to a 22–3 mark the past two seasons and is coming off a year when he set the FBS single-season record for pass efficiency.

DEUCE VAUGHN

RB × KANSAS STATE

The 5' 6" Vaughn more than doubled his rushing production as a sophomore, earning All-American honors after totaling 1,872 all-purpose yards and 22 TDs.

JAREN HALL

QB × BYU

Hall, a fifth-year junior, took the reins from Zach Wilson fairly seamlessly, throwing 20 TDs and guiding the Cougars, who were 17th in the nation in total offense, to 10 wins.

BRAELON ALLEN

RB × WISCONSIN

Poised to be next in the line of great Badgers backs, Allen ran for nearly 1,300 yards as a freshman in 2021, scoring 12 TDs and proving elusive to tacklers.

GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES (LEARY); JOE ROBBINS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MCCALL); SCOTT SEWELL/USA TODAY SPORTS (VAUGHN); JEROME MIRON/USA TODAY SPORTS (HALL); JEFF HANISCH/USA TODAY SPORTS (ALLEN)

13 MICHIGAN STATE

The Spartans will spend this year trying to show that last season's formula of transfers and big plays—which enabled them to upset rival Michigan—can be sustained

MICHIGAN STATE has one big question to answer this season: Can it do *that* again? It's not just that the Spartans won 11 games, including a New Year's Six bowl, it's how they did it. Advanced stats say Michigan State overperformed last season. The Spartans were average in offensive efficiency, gaining 271 first downs while allowing 318, but tremendous in explosiveness, scoring on roughly 65% of red zone opportunities.

The 2021 roster was built heavily by the transfer portal, offering a short-term infusion of seasoned talent, led by Kenneth Walker III. The former Wake Forest back was one of the nation's most exciting players, but he's now with the Seattle Seahawks, and the Spartans will have to replace his 1,636 rushing yards and 18 TDs. While coach Mel Tucker said he wants to build around high school talent, it will likely be transfers who will step into Walker's shoes—Jalen Berger (Wisconsin) and Jarek Broussard (Colorado).

On defense, **Xavier Henderson** is one of the best defensive backs in the Big Ten, but there isn't much beyond that. Tucker will coach the cornerbacks, as one of the worst secondaries in the country will get a boost from Ameer Speed, a transfer from Georgia. —R.J.

HENDERSON
3

14 OKLAHOMA STATE

Mike Gundy and the Cowboys nearly crashed the CFP behind their defense, but they might not be able to rely on that alone to match their 2021 success

THE COWBOYS WERE an offensive juggernaut for most of Mike Gundy's 17-year tenure as coach, but that changed in 2021. Oklahoma State had one of the best defenses in the country and nearly got to the CFP with an offense that merely played complementary football. Six of its 12 wins were by one score. With Jim Knowles heading to Ohio State, Derek Mason was hired from Auburn to run the defense. He will have to replace much of the secondary and linebacking corps and lean on end **Brock Martin** if the Cowboys want to maintain their newfound defensive identity. —R.J.

NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL/USA TODAY NETWORK (MICHIGAN STATE); NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES (OKLAHOMA STATE)

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15

MIAMI

Born in Miami to Cuban immigrants, **MARIO CRISTOBAL** won two national titles as a lineman for the Hurricanes. Now he's come back home, intent on returning the program to its glory days

by ROSS DELLENGER

photograph by ALEXANDER AGUILAR

SOMETIMES, LATE at night, when Mario Cristobal is leaving the Miami football complex, he drives toward Kindred Hospital, a long-term acute-care center. Before arriving, he often realizes his mistake and wheels around toward his family's rental home near campus.

"It's old habit," he says.

For more than three months, Clara Cristobal lay intubated in a hospital bed, in and out of consciousness, unable to speak. Her illness coincided with her youngest son realizing a dream—accepting the head coaching job at Miami last December, a Cuban American captaining his hometown team's football program.

While he toiled away putting his plans in place to revive one of college football's lost brands, Cristobal spent early mornings and late nights at his mother's bedside. He would play videos for her. He would talk to her, hold her hand, brush her hair. She'd smile at times, even squeeze his fingers. "At the end," Cristobal says, "she started to blow kisses." Her final goodbye, at age 81, came March 4.

“She went knowing that he was home,” says Luis Cristobal Jr., Mario’s older brother. “She got to know that. She was happy.”

If anything, Mario’s move from Oregon to Miami is one of family. It is one of home and heart. Few would be better suited for such a revival project than a 51-year-old coach at the top of his craft—a bilingual, Miami-bred man who grew up blocks from the university’s campus, played for the Hurricanes and began his coaching career there.

Is this really happening? ¿Está sucediendo esto realmente?

Cristobal returned to resurrect a program whose most recent national championship came 20 years and five coaches ago. He is back to save the Hurricanes. “Miami has always been what I am. . . . This is the only place in the world where I don’t need a GPS,” he says. “The fact is, I need to be at Miami, and Miami needs me.”

* * *

ABOUT THREE MILES from the Miami campus, adjacent to a strip mall of stores with barred windows and signs in Spanish, is a single-floor home with clay-colored walls and a tiled roof. This is where Luis Sr. and Clara Cristobal raised two street-fighting sons in Coral Terrace, a neighborhood where their home was one of the few safe from robberies and vandalism. In high school, Luis grew to 6' 3", 240 pounds, and Mario grew to 6' 4", 230 pounds. No one messed with the Cristobals.

Luis Sr. and Clara separately fled Fidel Castro’s communist regime in the 1960s, not long after Luis Sr. was incarcerated as a political prisoner in Cuba. They met in Miami and spoke only Spanish—the first language of their sons as well. Luis Jr. and Mario learned English from watching *The Three Stooges* and *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends*. Luis Sr., who died in ’96, opened a car battery shop, and Clara worked as a clerk. They instilled a relentless work ethic in their boys, along with strong roots in their Catholic faith and a commitment to education.

“My only regret is neither of my parents got to see a free Cuba,” Luis Jr. says. He declined to detail his parents’ plights on the island except to say, “They suffered greatly.”

Clara once told Mario that if he ever visited Cuba, “I’ll turn over in the grave and slap your ass.”

The Cristobals’ pride in their adopted hometown and college team played significant roles in Mario’s accepting the job. As a young boy, he pedaled his bike

MOVING ON: MORE NOTABLE HEAD COACHING CHANGES

BRIAN KELLY

NOTRE DAME ▸ LSU

His surprising decision to leave Notre Dame this past offseason came at a steep price for LSU (10 years, $100 million). The price for Kelly: competing in the SEC West.

MARCUS FREEMAN

NOTRE DAME

The defensive guru, 36, was promoted to lead one of sport’s biggest brands. His reward: opening vs. Ohio State, a date with Clemson and a season finale against USC.

BRENT VENABLES

CLEMSON ▸ OKLAHOMA

The Clemson assistant has turned down many jobs but couldn’t resist this one. He aims to guide OU back to better days, when he worked with Bob Stoops (1999 to 2011).

SONNY DYKES

SMU ▸ TCU

He had to move only from Dallas to Fort Worth, but Dykes replaces the dismissed Gary Patterson, a man commemorated with a statue outside Amon G. Carter Stadium.

FROM LEFT: JOHN KORDUNER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS; MATTHEW LYNCH/CAL SPORT MEDIA/AP

onto campus to watch Hurricanes greats of the 1980s practice on the same fields now visible through his office window. Both brothers were offensive linemen for the U—Luis from '87 to '90 (winning one national title), and Mario from '89 to'92 (two championships). In an interview for his first coaching job, a graduate assistant spot at Miami, then coach Butch Davis asked 20-something Mario about his long-term goal in life. Mario pointed at Davis, "To be sitting in that chair."

Since returning to Miami, he has rediscovered his home. He stops into famed restaurant Versailles to hear Cuban gossip from the locals. He swings over to Casa Juancho for his favorite Cuban meal. He fishes off Miami Beach bridges with his two sons, Mario Mateo and Rocco, just like his father did with him and Luis. "I've been away for so long, I forgot how much I loved it here," Mario says. "I f------ love this place, ya know?"

Cristobal's return was part of a movement to lift the program out of a two-decade hole that coincided with the internet boom (no more hiding South Florida recruits from the rest of the country) and other schools surpassing Miami in resources. Along with Cristobal replacing Manny Diaz, the school replaced athletic director Blake James with another high-profile hire, Dan Radakovich, one of the architects of Clemson's recent dynasty.

"Miami had such a strong run—five national championships in a 20-year period—that after all the success, they're like, 'Why build something new? We've won without it,' " says Mark Richt, who coached the Hurricanes from 2015 to '18. "There were a lot of things they were behind on or didn't have in place, period."

Cristobal is competitive in everything he does. This is a man so skilled in jujitsu that Luis says he was once "one of the most dangerous men in Miami," forcing opponents into submission at local dojos. Luis recalls how Mario once witnessed a robbery, chased down the perpetrator and, after catching him, showed the robber just how good he was at the Brazilian martial art. Cristobal now combines that strength with diplomacy and acquiring talent.

Since Cristobal took over, there has been a wave of wins on the recruiting trail for Miami's 2023 class: Francis Mauigoa, the top offensive tackle in

"Football here is life," says Cristobal. "I feel like **I WORKED MY WHOLE LIFE TO BE THE HEAD COACH AT MIAMI.** Everything is in place to make this a perennial power."

DAN LANNING

GEORGIA ▸ OREGON

The former Georgia defensive coordinator takes over a team ready for success. Cristobal's recruiting gives Oregon arguably the most talented team in the Pac-12.

BILLY NAPIER

LOUISIANA ▸ FLORIDA

One of the hottest names in coaching the past few years, Napier looks to lead UF to its first SEC title since 2008. Dan Mullen's quick fall proves the leash will be short.

KALEN DeBOER

FRESNO STATE ▸ WASHINGTON

The three-time NAIA champ was elevated to the bigs after a nine-win season with the Bulldogs. He has a solid 79–9 career record, but he'll face his toughest competition yet.

TIMMY CHANG

COLORADO STATE ▸ HAWAI'I

The former Rainbow Warriors quarterback now leads his alma mater despite having never been an FBS coordinator. Chang, 40, took his first full-time job just eight years ago.

BEN LONERGAN/THE REGISTER-GUARD/USA TODAY NETWORK; DOUG ENGLE/OCALA STAR BANNER/USA TODAY NETWORK; TED S. WARREN/AP; COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII ATHLETICS

the country, and Riley Williams, the second-best tight end, as well as three more players within the top 10 at their positions. The Hurricanes are barreling toward their first top-five signing class since they finished No. 1 in 2008. Coinciding with Cristobal's arrival, billionaire booster John Ruiz has spent $7 million this year on name, image and likeness deals, at Miami and beyond—dollars that have drawn an official inquiry by the NCAA.

But success goes beyond cash deals. Cristobal is in the process of aligning with the South Florida community, repairing bridges and rekindling relationships. Within Miami's football facility, the coach has no time for gimmicks, removing the notorious turnover chains, the gaudy in-game jewelry worn by players who recovered a fumble or picked off a pass. Cristobal normally beats everyone to the building before 5 a.m. and is the last one out at 11 p.m. He does this six days a week and expects the same dedication from his staff and players. Cristobal's practices are also intense, akin to preseason camp. "We train hard as s---," says Aaron Feld, the team's strength coach, "and we practice hard as s---, too."

PARENTAL GUIDANCE
Clara and Luis Sr. were a constant source of support for Mario (center).

Cristobal is determined to return Miami back to a program whose championships brought together a diverse group of people, many of them immigrants. "The U is the one thing that unites this city," says Jose Mas, a Cuban American tech CEO, Miami booster and high school classmate of Cristobal's. "Every city has a sports team it rallies behind. Here, the Dolphins came, then the Heat, then the Marlins, but the U has been here all along."

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MARIO CRISTOBAL didn't get a chance to say one last goodbye to his mother. Doctors performed an emergency intubation on her Nov. 27 while her son led Oregon's walkthrough before their rivalry game against Oregon State. A staff member rushed onto the practice field to pull him away. He got to the phone too late.

"We were in the room and holding off the doctors," Luis recalls. " 'Give me one more minute!' I'm watching her fade in front of me. I'm talking to her, and the doctor told me, 'We've got to do this now or else.' "

Mario lives with that to this day, unable to have a final moment with the woman who fled Cuba and worked until she was 79. "It's hard," he says. "I never made it to the phone." He did make it home, however.

Above his desk in his office, not far from where his mother died, Cristobal has framed photos of the four coaches who have won national titles at Miami: Howard Schnellenberger, Jimmy Johnson, Dennis Erickson and Larry Coker. What other school has had four coaches win national championships in a 20-year span? "None," he says. "Football here is life. I feel like I need to be around that. I feel like I worked my whole life to be the head coach at Miami. Everything is in place to make this a perennial power."

Only time will tell whether a fifth framed picture will be added to that wall, the face of Clara Cristobal's youngest son, the pride of Miami and now its beacon of hope.

"I think it's a given: He's going to win a national title," Luis says. "I'm biased because he's my brother, but the kid is a badass. He's never lost that edge." □

COURTESY OF THE CRISTOBAL FAMILY

16

OREGON

The Ducks are led by a new coach and a defensive star with a familiar name on the back of his uniform

MEET THE LATEST and greatest **Sewell brother: Noah**.

Gabriel and Arlene Sewell moved their family of seven—one daughter and four boys—from American Samoa to Utah in 2012. Why? Because Gabriel believed his boys were good enough to play college football at the highest level. Turns out, he was right.

Gabe, the oldest boy, played linebacker at Nevada. Nephi, the next oldest, was a defensive back at Utah. Penei was an All-American at Oregon and now plays right tackle for the Detroit Lions. But Noah might be the best of them all. The 6' 3", 250-pound linebacker, whom many project to follow Penei as a first-rounder, last year led Oregon in tackles with 114—or 37 more than any other Duck. And the sophomore's value goes beyond stats. While he also had four sacks, two forced fumbles and an INT last season, his mental sharpness makes him the quarterback for Oregon's defense.

His Ducks will look to advance to a fourth straight Pac-12 championship game. The team has a new coach in Dan Lanning, who coordinated a championship defense last year at Georgia. Thanks to the recruiting of former coach Mario Cristobal, Lanning will lead a loaded roster. But his first test is a tough one: against his old Bulldogs in Atlanta. —R.D.

BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (OREGON); DAVID E. KLUTHO (IOWA)

17

IOWA

Kirk Ferentz and the Hawkeyes look to bolster up on offense and reach another bowl game. And Iowa's home crowd will be there to give them a boost

IT'S A RELATIVELY new tradition but has quickly become one of the coolest things in college football: the Hawkeye Wave. Look for it at the end of the first quarter, from everyone in Kinnick Stadium to the kids looking out the windows from the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital next door. Wave participants include the players and coaches on both teams, who drop everything for a moment of perspective. It warms the heart like nothing else in the sport. Here are a few more notable stadium atmospheres that should make your to-do list this season:

Pregame: LSU's Tiger Stadium. The sights, smells and sounds make for an unmatched tailgating experience. **Halftime:** Mississippi Veterans Memorial Stadium. Jackson State's Sonic Boom of the South marching band brings the funk. **End of third quarter:** Florida's Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, where fans sing "I Won't Back Down" by Gainesville product Tom Petty. **Postgame:** Clemson's Death Valley, where fans have a "gathering at the paw" after every game. —P.F.

18

HOUSTON

Coiffing coaches in college football? We can't resist, as Dana Holgorsen looks to keep the Houston train, and his iconic mane, rolling

IN COLLEGE football, hair can make a statement. It can also be that good-luck charm players or coaches won't dare to mess with during a winning streak or until they win a conference championship.

But Houston coach Dana Holgorsen doesn't need a reason—when your hair is in a league of its own, you just let your locks flow.

Make no mistake, though, his team channeled the power of his homegrown infinity scarf to help the program bounce from 3–5 in 2020 to 12–2 last season. The Cougars' only losses came in their season opener against Texas Tech and in the American Athletic Conference championship vs. playoff contender Cincinnati. They closed out the campaign with a 17–13 win against Auburn in the Birmingham Bowl.

Holgorsen will look to build on that in 2022. QB Clayton Tune (3,546 yards, 30 TDs) returns for his senior season. And while Houston lost star running back Alton McCaskill IV to a torn ACL in the spring, junior wideout Nathaniel Dell is back after leading the team in TD receptions (12) and receiving yards (1,329).

Holgorson's, um, hairiest test in the team's final season in the AAC before joining the Big 12 will come early: on the road against Texas Tech on Sept. 10.—*Daniela Perez*

FROM SKULLET TO BOWL CUT, THESE COLLEGE FOOTBALL COACHES ARE FOLLICULAR FASHION ICONS

DANA HOLGORSEN

COACH ✖ HOUSTON

The top might be disappearing faster than the Pac-12, but the back remains perfect. That leaves what stylists call a skullet—and few wear it better than Holgorsen.

MIKE GUNDY

COACH ✖ OKLAHOMA STATE

He—gasp!—chopped off his locks before last season because it was too much maintenance. There might have been a method to his madness—the Cowboys went 12–2.

DAVID YOST

OFF. COORDINATOR ✖ FIU

At rest, it's a bowl cut. On the move, it looks like a sheepdog hanging its head out the window of a car going 50 mph. The QB guru's 'do will be on display in Miami.

JAMEY CHADWELL

COACH ✖ COASTAL CAROLINA

He had the perfect amount of bang and flow but trimmed the back late last season. Success (a bowl win and an 11–2 finish) followed, but please—bring it back, coach!

FROM LEFT: TROY TAORMINA/USA TODAY SPORTS; BRIAN BAHR/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL C. JOHNSON/USA TODAY SPORTS; REINHOLD MATAY/USA TODAY SPORTS

19

BAYLOR

The Bears may not repeat as Big 12 champions this season, but their array of on-field threads will still garner attention

AFTER ITS Big 12 championship and a Sugar Bowl victory against Ole Miss, Baylor lost the core of its offense, including five of its six top receivers. So the Bears will have a new look this season—but thankfully, it won't extend to the team's uniforms *(below)*, which remain among the best in college football. Baylor has options, rotating its yellow, green and white jerseys, pants and helmets.

As for the players wearing them, tight end Ben Sims (31 catches last year) is the top returning receiver for quarterback Blake Shapen. The sophomore started in place of the injured Gerry Bohanon in the Big 12 title game and completed his first 17 passes, with three TDs. (Bohanon has since transferred to South Florida.) How Shapen plays without his top targets remains to be seen. One thing is for sure: He'll look good doing it. —D.P.

MATTHEW LYNCH/CSM/SHUTTERSTOCK (BAYLOR);
ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (CINCINNATI)

20

CINCINNATI

The Bearcats will rely on a veteran offensive line to help make their case on the field and in the CFP race

THE BEARCATS HAD a school-record nine players drafted in the spring, including a top-five pick (cornerback Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner) and a four-year starting quarterback (Desmond Ridder). But the rebuild is not total, thanks to an offensive line that returns intact and has a combined 90 starts at Cincinnati. Three—tackle Dylan O'Quinn, guard Lorenz Metz and center **Jake Renfro**—were first-team all-conference players in 2021.

There is a group of other teams whose entire starting offensive lines are returning this year, each with their own challenges:

Oregon had to mix and match positions last year due to injuries, which means it has a lot of flexibility within the starting group.

After **Pittsburgh** lost a Heisman finalist QB and its Biletnikoff Award–winning wide receiver, it might be time for the Panthers to embrace the ground game.

South Florida faces a slow build under coach Jeff Scott, but a veteran line is one of several reasons for optimism heading into Year 3.

Stanford's most likely path back to competitiveness under coach David Shaw is with a return to a power running game. That is the first building block.

At **West Virginia**, transfer QB JT Daniels has been injury-prone in previous stops at USC and Georgia, but the experienced line here might improve his chances of staying on the field all season. —P.F.

21

BYU

The Cougars prepare for one last hurrah as an independent, and their schedule shows they should be ready for the bigger stage

TWELVE YEARS OF FBS independence in Provo are nearly over in 2022, as the Cougars kick off their final season before joining the Big 12. It's a major step for coach Kalani Sitake's program, which is coming off back-to-back seasons with double-digit wins. BYU showed in '21 it is ready for a bigger stage, going 5–0 against the Pac-12 and adding a sixth Power 5 victory against Virginia in what was thought to be a rebuilding season for the Cougars. Their schedule this fall is even trickier, with trips to Oregon and Stanford, home tilts against Arkansas and Baylor, and a neutral-site clash with Notre Dame.

Junior quarterback Jaren Hall returns to lead an offense that was 29th in scoring and 31st in passing a season ago, and he will have two of his top weapons back in receivers Puka Nacua and Gunner Romney. Cal transfer **Christopher Brooks** was a key offseason acquisition who will help fill the void left by star running back Tyler Allgeier, now in the NFL with the Atlanta Falcons. This team looks deeper than 2021's 10–3 lineup, but a lot will hinge on the progress of a defense that was hampered by injuries in '21, finishing outside the top 70 in both passing and rushing yards surrendered per game. If it all coalesces in '22, the Cougars have the schedule to climb the rankings. —M.G.

22

KENTUCKY

Led by top NFL draft quarterback prospect Will Levis, the Wildcats may have some tricks up their sleeves against steep SEC competition

KENTUCKY MAY NOT be the first team you think of when listing college football's most intriguing offenses, but it is trying to build upon something that's all the rage at the NFL level.

"Pro-style offense" has had different definitions over the years, but it's come to mean an offense with a ground game that is predicated on an outside-zone run scheme using bootlegs and play-action to set up the passing game.

Zone-blocking in college football is far from a foreign concept. It's the partial namesake of the trend that dominated the sport over the past decade: the zone read. Offensive linemen have an area of the defensive front they're responsible for, and they block who is in their zone. If they're "uncovered," they double-team with the lineman next to them and look to get to the second level to take on a linebacker. In the late 1990s, Denver Broncos coach Mike Shanahan popularized the blocking scheme, which allowed quarterbacks who are not exactly All-Pros—such as the Lions' Jared Goff and the Titans' Ryan Tannehill—to have deep playoff runs.

JAREN WILKEY/BYU PHOTO (BYU); JORDAN PRATHER/USA TODAY SPORTS (KENTUCKY)

The NFL coaches currently at the forefront of continuing the trend are Shanahan's son, Kyle, in San Francisco and Rams coach Sean McVay. (Both worked for Mike in Washington.) But roughly 25% of the NFL is connected to the Shanahan coaching tree, with that number likely to grow over the next few years.

Which brings us back to Kentucky. Liam Coen was brought to Lexington as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach heading into last season to develop quarterback Will Levis and start to implement this brand of offense. Previously he'd spent three seasons on McVay's staff in Los Angeles as assistant receivers coach and then as assistant quarterbacks coach. Coen has returned to the Rams to be their offensive coordinator, but the pro-style game he began building will continue under new coordinator Rich Scangarello, who comes from San Francisco (where he was the 49ers' quarterbacks coach) and brings offensive line coach Zach Yenser with him.

If Scangarello can get Levis to succeed in this system, it will be an advertisement for the program that it can develop quarterbacks for the next level—and Levis gets to head into the NFL with two years' experience in a popular offensive system.

Levis passes the eye test on measurables: He's 6' 3" and has plenty of arm strength—he finished fifth in total passing yards, sixth in passing touchdowns and second in rushing TDs in the SEC in 2021. He has shown flashes of brilliance in carrying out the Rams' passing concepts Coen implemented, but he has a propensity to turn the ball over—13 interceptions last year—and he needs to clean up his overall footwork and accuracy. Most early '23 mock drafts have Levis in the first round, but he is certainly not a finished product as a passer. A bet on him now is a bet on the traits he has.

Levis will be counting on a combination of young receivers to replace Wan'Dale Robinson, the target on 40% of the QB's throws last year: junior DeMarcus Harris, who has the most career receptions (26) of returning players, and transfer Tayvion Robinson.

In front of Levis, Eli Cox moved from right guard to center in the spring, while two starting tackle positions will have to be filled. There is plenty of excitement around Kiyaunta Goodwin, a true freshman who is one of Kentucky's highest-rated recruits.

Yenser said he is trying to develop an eight-man rotation, so depth will be the concern beyond just making sure the starters are capable. They will potentially pave the way for one of the conference's top running backs, Chris Rodriguez Jr., who ran for 1,379 yards last year.

Rodriguez, however, pleaded guilty to a DUI charge in July; although he is training, the team had not said at the time of publication whether it will affect his roster spot. —R.J.

BACK IN ACTION
Cox (75) returns after missing the last four games of 2021 with a hand injury.

KENTUCKY
75
65
25
4
J. WILLIAMS

23

UCLA

Chip Kelly and the long-suffering Bruins look to build upon their first winning season together, but history is not on their side

UCLA HAS BEEN waiting nearly seven decades for its national title drought to end. And the Bruins' move to the brutal Big Ten in 2024 won't help matters, so if UCLA is going to break that spell, now is the time.

As their Pac-12 tenure winds down, the Bruins signed 58-year-old coach Chip Kelly to a four-year extension in January, solidifying the program's faith in him—for the time being. But he will still face a skeptical fan base despite leading UCLA to its first winning season since 2015 and a convincing 62–33 victory against rival USC. The Bruins have made just two appearances ('11, '12) in the league championship game since its inception in '11.

So, where does that leave UCLA now? Quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson (2,409 yards, 21 TDs last year) returns for a fifth season and will lead one of the conference's best offenses. On defense, Bill McGovern, an NFL and college coaching stalwart, was brought in from the Bears to run the unit. UCLA's schedule is one of the easiest in the Pac-12, giving the team its best chance for a Hollywood ending before entering the college football lion's den.

The Bruins are not alone in their futility, though. **Texas A&M**'s secession from the Big 12 in 2012 has not been fruitful. The Aggies' last national title was in 1939, their last conference championship was in '98 and they haven't so much as appeared in the SEC title game.

Illinois hasn't won a national title since 1951. At least A&M is trending in the right direction, unlike the Illini, who haven't put together a winning season since 2011.

The longest title drought, though? You have to go back to the 19th century to find **Rutgers**' last national crown. It came in 1869, when the Scarlet Knights and Princeton were the only two teams in college football. —D.P.

24

TENNESSEE

With the NCAA's 18-month probe behind them, the Volunteers will look to their veteran core

AFTER THE COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the 2020 season, the NCAA gave affected athletes a fifth year of eligibility. Last year so-called super seniors made an impact all over the college landscape. Just to name two: Defensive back Coby Bryant helped Cincinnati to the CFP, and quarterback Levi Lewis set the Louisiana career record for TDs en route to leading the Ragin' Cajuns to a 13–1 record.

There will be plenty more old faces in key places this season. In the SEC alone, Georgia has safety Chris Smith II, who picked off a pass in the CFP title game, to bring stability to a unit hurt by the NFL draft. And Arkansas has linebacker Bumper Pool, who finished 10th in the nation in tackles.

But no school will depend on super seniors more than Tennessee. The Vols have 12, led by quarterback **Hendon Hooker**, who had the best season of his collegiate career after transferring from Virginia Tech. He threw for 2,945 yards and 31 touchdowns, adding 620 yards and five TDs on the ground. Tight end Princeton Fant, who's been on the roster since 2017, also returns after posting 16 receptions for 220 yards and one TD last season. Kicker Chase McGrath set a Tennessee single-season record by making all 66 of his extra points. The Vols will also have safety Trevon Flowers, who had 82 tackles and two interceptions last season.

Having taken disciplinary steps amid recruiting violations from dismissed coach Jeremy Pruitt and his staff, Tennessee will be led by second-year coach Josh Heupel. Along with Hooker's go-to receiver, redshirt senior Cedric Tillman, the Vols will have plenty of leadership on the field in 2022. —D.P.

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25

PURDUE

Following his most successful year in West Lafayette, Boilermakers boss Jeff Brohm is likely to find himself in demand after the season

IN MAY, Boilermakers coach **Jeff Brohm**—who was coming off a 9–4 season that included upsets of Iowa and Michigan State—spoke at a gathering in his hometown of Louisville. The former Cardinals star quarterback was asked about turning down the job at his alma mater in 2018. His answer, in part: "It just was too early to leave. It just wasn't right. . . . But, obviously, now we're on Year 6. I love this town, this area. I'm an alumnus of Louisville. So anything can happen in the future." That's as close as a coach will come to signaling his willingness to take another job. One of the bigger challenges for Brohm: filling the draft departures of WR David Bell and DL George Karlaftis. Here are other coaches who could also be on the move after this season:

- **Luke Fickell,** Cincinnati. He should be the first call for every AD trying to fill a Cadillac job.
- **Jamey Chadwell,** Coastal Carolina. The fact that he is still at CCU after going 22–3 the past two seasons is remarkable.
- **Lane Kiffin,** Mississippi. He tried to get in on a couple of openings last year.
- **Matt Campbell,** Iowa State. He has been comfortable and successful in Ames, but it might be time.
- **Bryan Harsin,** Auburn. After boosters tried to fire him, he might just look to get out. —P.F.

Flip for NFL PREVIEW

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